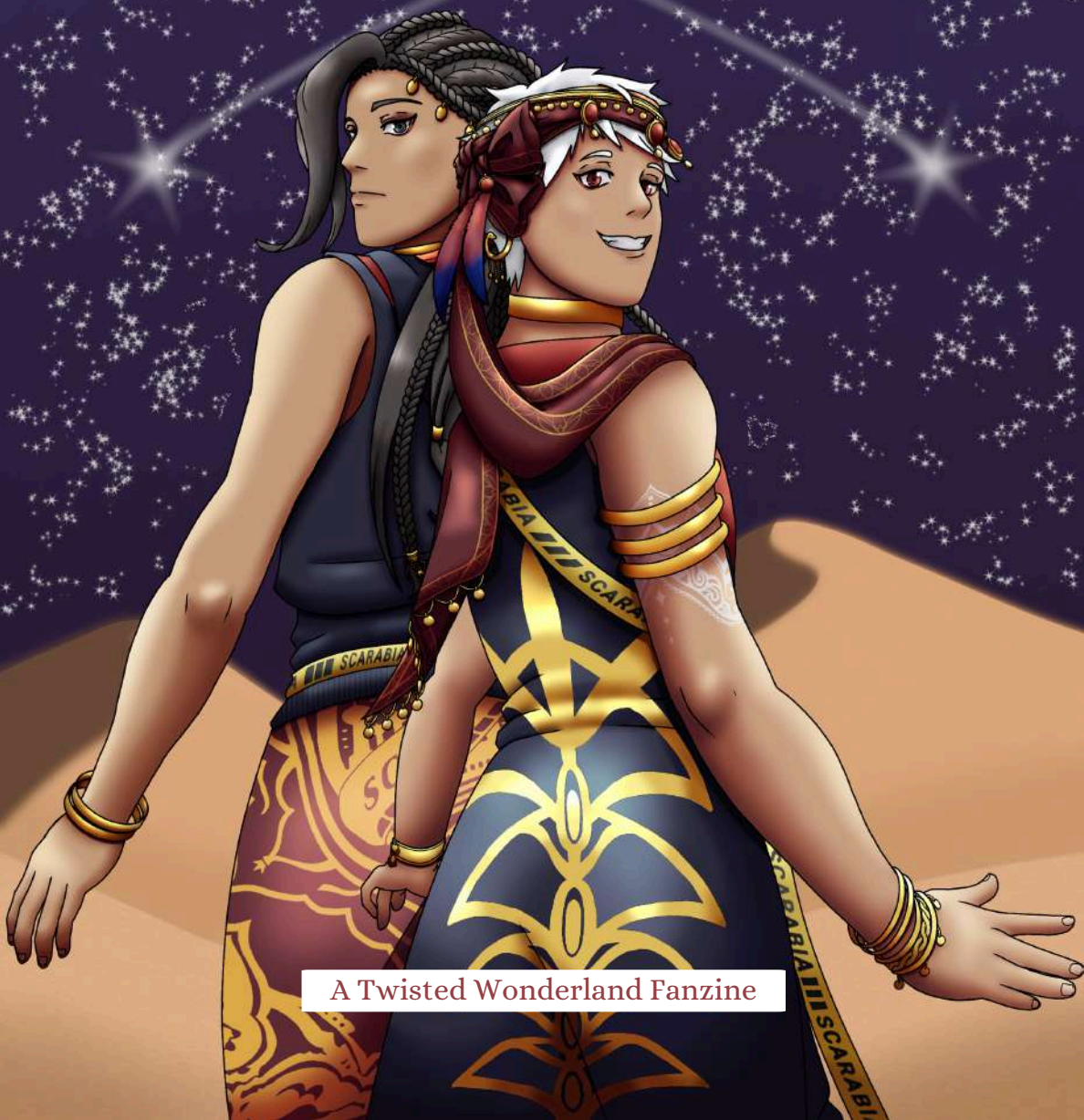


HESPERIOUS SANDS



A Twisted Wonderland Fanzine

To the Evening Sands...

Hello! Thanks for picking up this zine. It is the work of many people for over 6 months, and we sincerely hope you enjoy all the fanart and fanfiction we've created. A big thanks to the 32 contributors of the zine for their hard work, who have given us a total of 25 art works and 21 fanfics (2 of which are an interview and recipes)!

A big thank you to the mods as well, who contributed immensely into the management of the zine (thankfully we are not a rowdy group so we didn't need to be strict haha), and to Vione (@time-slime on tumblr), who, while making a single and a spread art, also worked on the front and back covers of the zine! She did not have to go as hard as she did but she feels possessed her and I've never been more grateful for it.

A big thank you to you as well, for picking this piece of us up!!! Spread word around and we might come back for a volume 2 soon ;)

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Fanfiction

S.No.	Title of the Fic	Page No.
1	Red Fridays, Blue Sundays Soru	1
2	How the Snake Got His Whisper Audrey	4
3	Baby Tigersitter ShrimpySheep	8
4	Student Spotlight! Life at NRC Mar	11
5	Moon Acim	15
6	Rowdy Parrot ShrimpySheep	16
7	Vipers of a Single Scale QuillAffinity	21
8	The Ones From the Scalding Sands Ner	27
9	Turmeric and Disenchantment Dio	29
10	Grit Your Teeth And Bear It QuillAffinity	34
11	Ruminate Chris	39
12	Cooking with Feeling Acim	41
13	Life With the Fool With the Gold(en Heart) Ner	44
14	The Real You That I Want to Know Olive	48
15	Grade AA Acting Fungi	54

Fanfiction

S.No.	Title of the Fic	Page No.
16	Student Spotlight! Life at NRC Mar	60
17	Gala Troubles and the Undermining Stress of the Heir Kouro	62
18	All Handled Shoopy	65
19	Lend a Hand Rain	70
20	To Glow Like the Stars Vione Hobbes	73
21	The Lie Audrey	77
22	Behind the Scenes Rain	80
23	Choices Soru	84



Blue Fridays, Red Sundays

| Soru

In Jamil's opinion, Fridays and Sundays were the worst days of the week. On Friday evenings, his family would accompany Kalim's family to the mosque on the outskirts of the city, where while his parents would indulge in prayer many feet behind their masters, Kalim would instead insist Najma and Jamil sneak out and explore the market with him. Never mind that Kalim had seen every nook and cranny of that market, never mind that it never had anything interesting he could buy with his pocket money, never mind just ten minutes after reaching, Najma would always start to complain about the sun and the sands and the weird merchandise sold by merchants who always seemed to eye her like some piece of meat.

But that was red, like the colour of danger and blood. There was nothing good about the mosque. Blue was different. Blue was Sunday, the last day of the week, when he remembered homework that rotted at the bottom of his school backpack. The last day of the week when he could truly just be a child, for he was dismissed early on account of his schooling (a liberty he would forfeit as soon as he left NRC and went back to the Scalding Sands). Blue was the colour of their home, quiet and cool, the chilly desert night to the fiery desert sun that Kalim's home was.



Blue was his parents humming an old song that he didn't know the name of as they danced together under the chandelier in the living room (gifted by the Al-Asims, which basically meant it was discarded despite being in working conditions).

Standing alone in the Scarabia dorm kitchen on a random blue Sunday with some slow song Jamil knew the name of in the back of his mind, he couldn't help but agree with his younger self. Except that maybe he should have overblotted years ago. Maybe that would have put him out of his misery sooner, freer from Kalim and the rest of his large and obnoxious family. But where would that leave your parents? Where would that leave Najma? And because of these questions, Jamil Viper- firstborn son of this generation of the Viper family- was granted no reprieve.

"Kalim. Why are you awake?" Jamil whispers after a few seconds of silence, and a white mop of hair peeks out from beyond the dorm kitchen door. "You have a class earlier than I do, remember? You're taking Advanced History and Theology."

"I know what classes I have, Jamil!" Kalim beams, and Jamil finds it very hard to match even a tenth of that energy. "But the question is... why are you awake? I told you I'm having lunch with Leona after AHT and Cosmology Theory tomorrow, so you don't have to do anything."

"I- I remember." Jamil mutters, gripping on the plate he picks out from the drawer nearby so hard his knuckles whiten, and Kalim smiles, though the emotion behind it is so mixed it's... hard. Hard to tell what he's thinking. "I remember. This isn't for you, it's for me."

"But you don't even like hummus and falafel wraps for breakfast." Kalim says, and Jamil feels his eyes rolling even without looking, and somehow, instead of any kind of normal, well-regulated emotion, he feels shame and rage. "I know we're not really on good terms anymore, but you shouldn't have to feel like you have to lie to me." Kalim pauses to take the plate out of Jamil's hands, and the latter doesn't look at him, but his knuckles are no longer white, and the plate (his plate) is no longer in his hands.

"Jamil. You should head back upstairs." is all Kalim says as he gently guides Jamil out of the kitchen and shuts himself in there with the hummus and falafel wraps, and Jamil doesn't stop to think when blue became red over the years as he hides himself beneath the covers of his fiery-red quilt. Good night, Jamil! he hears somewhere deep in his mind, and Jamil still says quiet. There is no need to scream at someone who is, sort of, a victim and a perpetrator as much as he is.



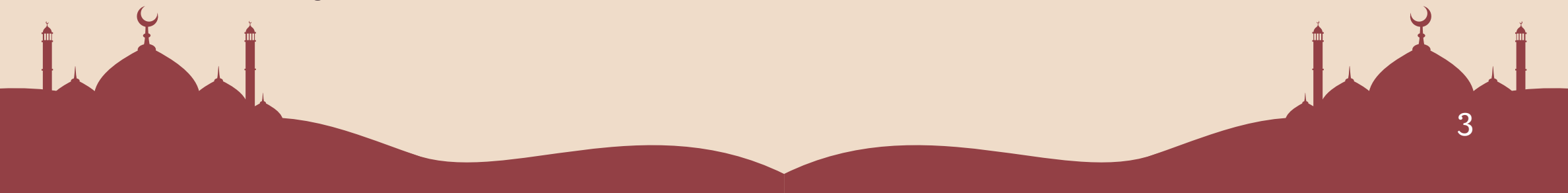
“And you want me in your class? Of all people?” Jamil murmurs, but takes the pamphlet from Leona anyways. “And what do you mean by ‘Kalim told me’?” Leona sighs and pinches his nose, and Jamil tries not to flinch- he’s made a mistake again, hasn’t he?- but Leona rolls his eyes and shows him a report with the STYX emblem on it, and Jamil’s eyes widen.

“I had the Radish bastard recover all of our data from the kidnapping. Your’s is particularly interesting- you have a mind for older spells and incantations, which is exactly what I’m lookin’ for.”

“I- see. Thank you for the offer, Leona-senpai, I’ll consider it carefully.” There’s a pause somewhere that Leona clearly doesn’t like, but he doesn’t say anything, even as Jamil’s heartbeat quickens and his mind fills like a blocked sink with thoughts threatening to spill, and walks away, gloved hand once again in the air waving goodbye as he heads off to the Botanical Gardens.

Sunday somehow rolls around, and Jamil Viper, firstborn son serving firstborn son and heir Kalim al-Asim, is a bundle of nerves, and not even Kalim’s enthusiasm, as annoying as it gets, can temper them. The professors called all the second years who qualified for advanced courses to pick and choose any 3 (would offer extra credit, making it easier for them to get into universities or find a job), and Jamil briefly catches Leona talking to Professor Trein, before looking at Crowley and taking the stage to introduce the course he was teaching.

And somewhere down the line, he looks straight at Jamil, though the others don’t really notice, and Jamil nods with determination. This Sunday, everything changes, Jamil avows without saying a word, and Leona smirks at him, and suddenly, Jamil just knows. *Everything will be alright one day.*



Karro



How the Snake got his Whisper

| Audrey

Kalim had been kidnapped when they were together at night. Kalim had wanted company, having been previously unnerved by a poisoning attempt that happened not too long ago. Jamil was safety to him. So when Kalim requested he stay with him for the night, he had no choice but to concede.

The assailant had slipped into Kalim's room from his large window, not caring that they made a loud sound. Jamil hid under Kalim's blankets, remaining undetected like he had been taught to do, ready to pounce when the man got close enough.

Of course, bodyguard training could only go so far for a child who was much smaller and weaker than the man. He grabbed Kalim's wrist and twisted it behind him as he yelped in pain. Jamil tried to fight back but, given that the attacker had no desire to capture Jamil alive, was more than happy to hit Jamil upside the head with the pommel of his dagger.

Jamil's world spun as he collapsed onto the ground, sounds of Kalim's frantic cries and the attacker's cruel threats swirled in his brain. When Jamil refused to stay down, gripping onto the person's legs and trying to kick their knees to get them to buckle down, the attacker simply took Jamil too.

The kidnapper shoved them in the trunk of their car and drove them to some undisclosed location. The man was arguing on the phone with another adult over the price of their ransom with the kidnapper. They discussed what to do with Jamil, should they get rid of him? Should they use him as a pawn to show how far they'd go in getting paid for Kalim's safe return.

Everything was about the money. It made him sick just to listen to it.

The two were tied beside each other and blindfolded. Jamil inched his way over to Kalim and began giving him instructions, "I'm going to lean down to where your hands are, you undo my blindfold and I'll undo your ropes."

"Okay," Kalim said, now eerily calm after the initial fright had left him.

This wasn't his first time in this situation and it wouldn't be his last.

Jamil laid down and felt Kalim's tied-up fingers struggle but eventually slipped the blindfold off Jamil's face. Now that he could see, he sat up and worked through the knot tying Kalim's hands together behind his back, occasionally looking over his shoulder to see his progress.

Once Kalim's hands were free, they exchanged turns and worked their way out of their restraints. He was sure these adults had no idea that Jamil had been trained for this and Kalim had prior experience. Writing them off as scared little kids who couldn't do anything was their mistake. "How are we going to get out?" Kalim whispered to him as Jamil set his legs free.

"I didn't get to see what this building looked like coming in this time..." Jamil said, he was upset he couldn't just rescue Kalim with the help of magic carpet either. It was rare for him to get dragged along when he was usually the one who snuck in, even as young as eight years old. "You're going to just have to look for it. I'll keep them busy as long as I can and hopefully there aren't more." Jamil instructed, "I think I felt us getting taken upstairs, if you find stairs go down them."

"I don't want to leave you." Kalim argued.

"You have to." Jamil insisted, "I can fight them off, I have magic- Immature magic with no training and no mage stone. Jamil had to make do as the man from before entered the room, lunging at Jamil who put his hands up to fight. He tried throwing small bouts of magic at him- fire, about the only spell he knew how to use. The flames spurted out just short of the man who fiercely grabbed him by the neck and pinned him to the ground.



Kalim was frozen in place, or at least Jamil thought he was, the edges of his vision were being clouded by black splotches as he lost the ability to breathe. All he could see was this deranged man squeezing the life out of him while he was helpless to do anything. *He didn't want to die. He had to do this, he had to protect Kalim and die for him if the need arose but he didn't want to die here.* Those frantic thoughts while on the edge of oblivion filled him with an energy unfamiliar to him, like a burst of strength coursing through his veins. All of a sudden, the man released his hold and stared at him with a vacant expression and glowing red eyes he could see his own reflection in.

The man kept staring, weapon still wielded in his hand, and as Jamil struggled to sit up with his head still spinning, he looked at that man with disgust and began to make demands. "S-stop..." the words barely came out, but as he found his voice again, he spoke louder, "Stop." Even louder, "STOP! JUST STOP! STOP!" He screamed, rejecting the crazed man in front of him as if his words were truly powerful enough to stop him.

And they were. The man took the dagger to his throat and slit it, ending his life just because Jamil told him to stop. No, that wasn't it, Jamil had thought in his mind that he wanted this man to cease existing, to stop being here, tormenting them and killing them. He wanted that man gone, and he was. He did that. "Jamil..." Kalim says, voice laced with concern. He had seen as clear as day what Jamil had done, he witnessed the glow of his signature spell form around him and saw the results.

At the call of his name, Jamil started to cry. He couldn't hold back his choked sobs which just seemed to slip out. He could barely keep himself sitting upright until Kalim rushed over to him and held him in his arms. Kalim pressed Jamil's head into his chest and they stayed there like that for a while, Kalim repeatedly assuring him "It's okay, Jamil, It's going to be okay," over and over until his tears dried up.

Kalim purposefully shielded Jamil from seeing the corpse with his body, a gesture Jamil wouldn't realize until later in life that it was done so to protect him. He heaved heavy sobs onto Kalim, the combination of his inability to breath and the shock made him feel like he were going to pass out.

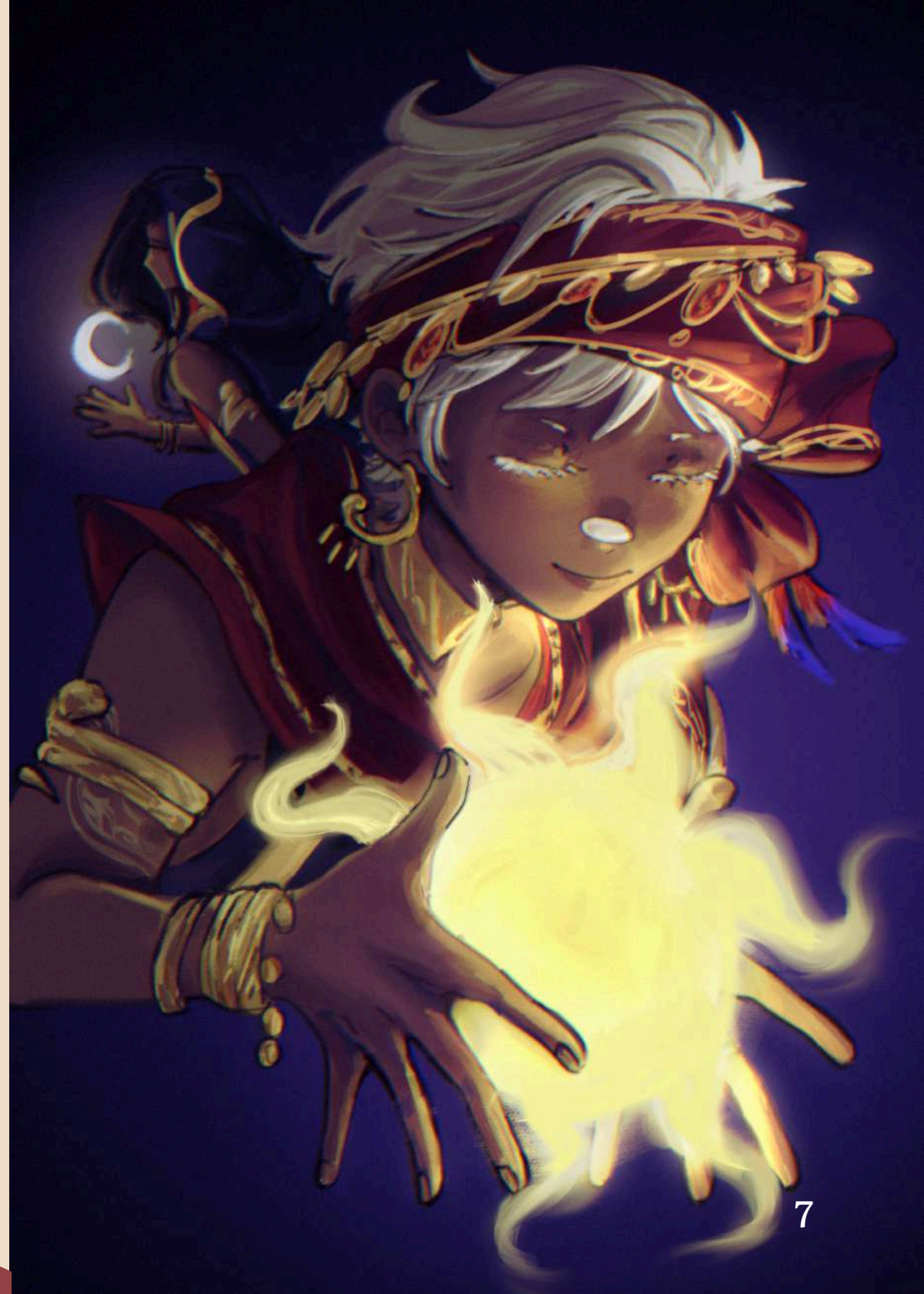
Kalim instructed him to breath, and in his vulnerable state, he followed Kalim's orders without his usual grudge. Kalim felt safe, they were safe now because of him and his terrifying magic.

Once he could speak again, Jamil looked at Kalim and asked him to keep a promise. "Please, never tell anyone I can do this." Jamil begged.

If people were to find out this was his signature spell, and this was how he got it, they'd think of him as a monster. "I promise." Kalim said without faltering, and it was a promise he kept.



Even into their second year at NRC, while under the influence of Jade's signature spell, beckoning him to reveal the truth of Snake Whisper's influence over him, Kalim's promise prevailed. "I can't say. I must never tell anyone. I made a promise long ago. So I can't say."



Baby Tigersitter

| ShrimpySheep

You received a call from Kalim because he wanted to ask you a favor.

“So, you remember yesterday's parade, right? With the elephants, camels, peacocks and all? So, it turns out that with the adult tigers also came a cub. And we found out about this because Jamil found him today in the kitchen looking for food. He's going to call the caretakers to return the little one to his parents, but he asked me to call you and ask you to help me take care of him until they come and get him. Could you help us?”

You asked if it wouldn't be dangerous, after all it's still a tiger, but Kalim assured you that he's very docile and friendly, and even told you that he has experience in taking care of tigers. So you accepted. But when you told Grim, he said straight away that he didn't want to go with you because it was a tiger. You left him in Ramshackle and went to Scarabia.

“Hey, where're you going?” Kalim's voice is the first thing you hear as you enter the dorm, followed by an unusual meow. You hear clumsy little paws approaching you and see a baby tiger appear to greet you with another meow. Kalim appears soon after, walking without much hurry.

“Hey (Y/N) you're here!” He greets you with a huge smile, then looks at the little tiger. “Did you come to say hello to them? How nice of you.”

The cub still seemed undecided whether to approach you or not. Kalim picks him up as if he were just a big kitten and gets closer to you. “This is (Y/N). They're going to help me take care of you.” He picked up one of his paws and waved it at you. “Hi~”

Seeing that the tiger seemed to like and trust Kalim, you slowly brought your hand closer to pet the cub. He smells your hand curiously and lets you pet his head. He also lifts his paw to better inspect your hand, and then he opens his mouth and starts nibbling your fingers without hurting you. But even so, Kalim takes his hand to the tiger's mouth so that he bites his hand instead of yours.

“I think he wants to play. Let's take him outside to the palm trees.” You two go outside with the cub, sit on the ground in the shade of a palm tree and Kalim picks up a fallen leaf and starts playing with the tiger. You ask why Jamil isn't with you. It's strange that he's not supervising something like this closely.

“For some reason he doesn't seem to like Jamil.” He says with pity. “He said the tiger was stirred up when he saw him and whenever we are both present he hides behind me. So he got himself the task of speaking to the people responsible and arranging for them to come and pick him up while I looked after him.”

“He said to call you for help because you are the person he trusts the most to stay with me while he can't. I was happy to be able to invite you to play with the cub anyway.”

“You said you had experience taking care of tigers?”

“Ah yes. Tigers have been my family's pets for generations, so I was taught to take care of them. I have played with many cubs and taken care of a couple of old tigers. When we take you to visit my house, I'll introduce you to everyone!”

“How old do you think this cub is?”

“Around two months old. He must have come with his parents without the keepers noticing and wandered around exploring.” The tiger stopped playing and began to approach Kalim, meowing.

“Hm? What's wrong? Oh! Are you thirsty? No problem.” He gets up, helps you get up as well and picks up the cub. He walks with you to the fountain and sets the little tiger down on the wide edge. “Here, all the water you can drink, help yourself.” The cub leans over and starts drinking.

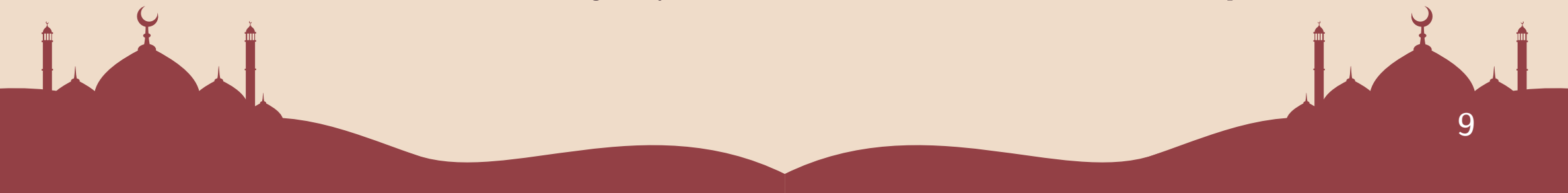
“Do you think I can pick him up?” You ask Kalim. “Sure! He seems to like you too. But be prepared because he can be a bit heavy.” Suddenly you hear a splash and when you two look the cub is swimming inside the fountain. But he doesn't seem scared, it seems like he was there because he wanted to, swimming calmly.

“It looks like he's already at the stage of learning to swim.” Kalim laughs. The cub swims for a little while until he gets back to the edge, but he has trouble getting up, so Kalim picks him up and takes him out of the fountain.

He was going to put the cub on the floor but to avoid accidentally dropping the little tiger, he ended up holding him in his arms before he could put him on the ground, getting all wet. “Luckily Scarabia is hot, I won't catch a cold. But I should still change when we go inside, at least before Jamil sees me. Ha ha.” The cub shakes itself, walks to your feet and starts meowing at you. He bites the hem of your pants and tries to pull you closer to the fountain. “Ah, I think I know what he wants.” Kalim says with an amused smile. “He wants you to join us in the fun.”

He makes a shell with his hands, fills them with water from the fountain and throws it at you playfully. And the truth is that it even felt good, considering the heat in Scarabia. You throw water at each other to the point where you both really need to change clothes.

You two and the cub go to the washroom to dry off and Kalim lends you some of his clothes while you leave yours out to dry. He uses a dryer to dry your hair and the little tiger's fur that seems to try to attack the wind coming out of the dryer. After that, the three of you go to the lounge, you sit on the floor cross-legged and the little tiger walks over to you. “He looks tired.” Kalim comments. “It must be time for his nap.”



The tiger climbs onto your lap and nestles between your legs. Kalim sits next to you. “Can I take a picture of us? Pleeese! I want to save this moment forever!” He takes a picture of the two of you with the baby tiger on your lap to post on Magicam.

And after that it will start to fill up with comments about the tiger, the two of you and... are you wearing Kalim's clothes?!

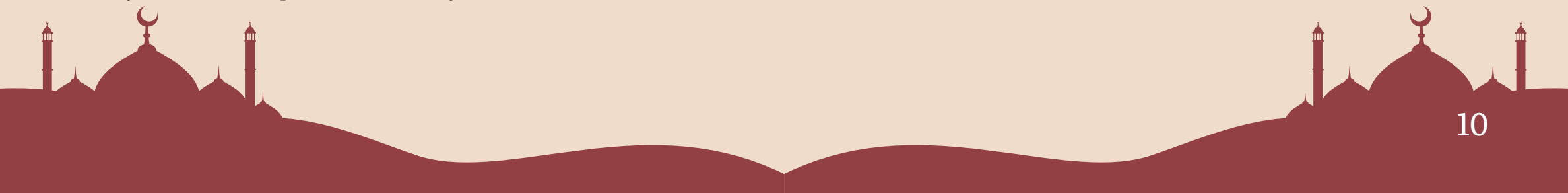
Later the keeper arrives in Scarabia. You wake up the little tiger and the keeper picks him up. In the keeper's arms, the cub begins to struggle a little, looking at Kalim and you. Kalim approaches them, brings his face close to the cub despite the keeper's attempts to stop him from doing so and the baby tiger licks his face. Then the cub looks at you.

Kalim turns around, wipes the tiger's drool from his face with his clothes and stretches out his arm to you. “He wants to say goodbye to you too.” He tells you with a slightly sad smile. “It's okay, he won't hurt you. You can trust me.” You hold Kalim's hand and he slowly brings you closer to the cub, you lean in and the little tiger licks your face. “By the way, what's his name?” Kalim asks as you wipe the tiger drool off your face. “Latif.”

“Well, goodbye Latif. *sniff* I'll come visit you. I promise!” The keeper puts Latif in a small transport cage and Jamil accompanies them to the exit. “Do you think I can adopt him?” Kalim asks you. You tell him no. “You're right, I shouldn't take him away from his family... What if I adopt the whole family?”

“Kalim, no! Besides, Jamil would be furious if you did that. As you said, you can go visit him.”

“You mean we can go visit him, right? You have to come with me. He liked you so much, he even fell asleep on your lap! Don't worry, whenever I go to visit Latif I'll take you with me... I'd like to believe that I won't forget this, but it's better to ask Jamil to remind me. Hehe.”





STUDENT SPOTLIGHT

Life at NRC: An Inside Look with
Scarabia's Housewarden and Vice
Housewarden with Mar!

Welcome back, dear readers! This week, we're continuing our Student Spotlight! series with two well-known figures from Scarabia Dorm: Prefect Kalim Al-Asim and his right-hand man, Vice Prefect Jamil Viper. We sat down with them separately to talk about school life, hobbies, and the unexpected joys (and occasional headaches) of dorm leadership.

Kalim al-Asim – Housewarden, the most likely to throw a surprise dorm party

Q: What's the best part about being a student at Night Raven College?

Kalim: Oh, that's easy! There's always something exciting happening! Whether it's classes, club activities, or a totally random event—like the time the ghosts wanted a last minute Halloween party and Malleus got involved—there's never a boring day. Plus, I get to meet so many amazing people from different dorms!

Q: What's the hardest class for you?

Kalim: Umm... probably Alchemy. Jamil helps me study, but there are just so many rules and measurements! I always try my best, though! Oh! But if you need help in Flight Class or Musicology, I've got you covered!

Q: If you could trade places with any other Housewarden for a day, who would it be?

Kalim: Maybe Vil? I wanna know what it's like to be so elegant and cool all the time! Plus, Pomefiore's got all those beauty secrets—I bet I'd learn a lot from them. Honestly, I'd kill to try out that one perfume they tend to use.

Q: If you could have a familiar, what would it be?

Kalim: A tiger! They're so majestic, and imagine how cool it'd be to have one lounging around Scarabia's halls. I actually wanted to bring a regular tiger here. Jamil says it'd be a bad idea, though... something about safety regulations.

Q: What's a fun fact about you that most people don't know?

Kalim: I'm really good at playing the oud! It's this string instrument from back home. I don't get to play much here, but when I do, I love seeing people's reactions! They always seem so surprised. Maybe I should have a little concert sometime!

Q: Describe Jamil in three words.

Kalim: Reliable, super-smart, and definitely patient! Haha, he puts up with a lot from me!

Q: Any advice for new students at NRC?

Kalim: Make as many friends as you can! Any new experience is way more fun when you have people to share it with, and that includes school. And don't stress too much about grades—wait, maybe don't tell the professors I said that. (Laughs) Just do your best and enjoy your time here!

*Jamil Viper – Vice Housewarden, the most likely to
be caught cleaning up someone else's mess*

Q: What's the best part about being a student at Night Raven College?

Jamil: If I had to pick, I'd say the independence. We have a lot of responsibilities here, and while it can be exhausting, it also means I have the freedom to improve myself.

Q: What's the hardest class for you?



Jamil: None in particular. ...Well, okay, if I have to name one, probably History of Magic. Not because it's difficult, but because the lectures are so long-winded. Even Kalim has to help me remember some things.

Q: If you could trade places with any other Vice Housewarden for a day, who would it be?

Jamil: I'm tempted to say Trey, because at least Heartslabyul has set rules to keep things running smoothly. But then I'd have to deal with Riddle's strictness, and all those rules... Probably Jade, then. Azul runs things in Octavinelle efficiently, and it seems like a place where you could get some peace and quiet. And I would also like to see how their business operations work... for educational purposes, of course.

Q: If you could have a familiar, what would it be?

Jamil: A snake, but not a large one. They're quiet, low-maintenance, and if there's ever a situation where you need to run, they can curl up in your pocket. If not, then a parrot would be perfect.

Q: What's a fun fact about you that most people don't know?

Jamil: I can juggle. It's useless for anything other than making my sister laugh, really, but I take pride in it. No, don't ask me to do it for you.

Q: Describe Kalim in three words.

Jamil: Energetic, well-meaning... and exhausting.

Q: Any advice for new students at NRC?

Jamil: Stay organized, stay focused, and don't let distractions derail you. Also, don't trust the portraits to tell you where something is. They enjoy our suffering.





Moon

| Acim

Jamil was the moon. That was how he would put himself. The glowing moon was overshadowed by the radiant sun. And who else would be the brilliant sun than no other than sunny Kalim himself? The one who was always smiling, the naive boy who would cheer up others, the boy who shone in the riches of his wealth... Jamil loathed the comparison.

Because unlike the moon who could only borrow the sun's light, Jamil is capable of shining on his own. He knows his abilities, what he's capable of...yet because of their status, he's forced to diminish his light. Suppressing himself into a shadow for Kalim's brightness. And as much as he wanted to rebel, to shine as bright—or even brighter than Kalim—the social statuses of master and servant were inevitable. It was a chain that tied him down, restricting him from the light and leaving him in the shadows.

Jamil hated it.

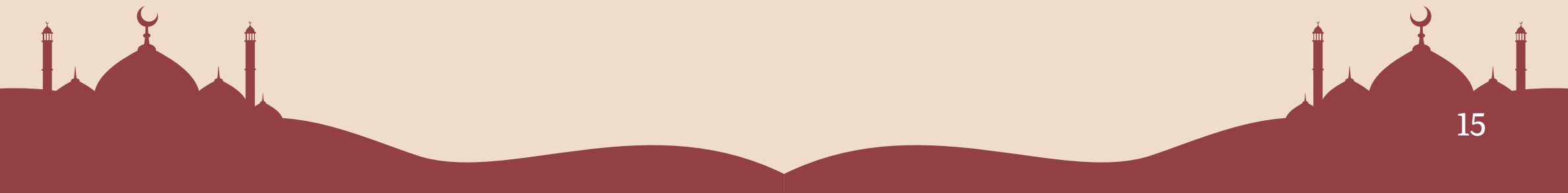
He wanted to break free from it. He wanted to scratch at it until it broke off. He wanted to shine. He wanted to be bright. He wanted...he wanted to be free. He wanted to step out of the shadows and bask in the praise and validation of others for his achievements.

He wanted to go all out on his talents and not be suppressed for once, to let his light shine again for everyone to see. He wanted to be seen. To be seen for who he really is and not the pale average facade he makes himself out to be.

And he supposes desperation and suppressed anger can make him reckless. It was a thought-out plan, really. He had freedom in NRC, where he wouldn't be held back and be able to shine. Yet when Kalim came along, the chain reappeared and he had to shrink himself small again to let Kalim shine. It was suffocating.

So it was going so well when he enacted his plan to get Kalim out. It was going so well, yet when the Prefect and the monster got involved, and he added them to the plan like pawns, they managed to derail it with assistance from Ashengrotto and the Leech twins.

And he couldn't backtrack, couldn't slink away and plan in the security of his persona when he was exposed to his dorm. It was a desperate gamble to hypnotize the entire dorm and turn them into an army he could control, but it was his only option other than surrender. And a Viper does not surrender. And when he overblotted, it was the best feeling in the world. He felt the power surge through him like a rushing river in his veins, the massive amount of magic he had was more than enough to keep his control on his dorm members.



He felt like he was shining with the dark, an eclipse where the moon covers the sun and takes its rays for itself. It blinds someone and leaves them seeing colours for days. He was high on the magic, and he loved every second of it. It felt like he could do anything... So imagine his despair when he was defeated by the same ones who thwarted his plans and assisted Kalim in his defeat.

It was like a rope to the light was cut as he was climbing, making him fall into the dark pit of despair and hopelessness. As if his dream of freedom was out of reach and out of sight. A darkness without alight. So imagine when he woke up and found himself alive from what is considered a magical disaster with Kalim crying.

He was lucky to be alive. Yes, but he's still not free.

So when Kalim offers the chance to restart as friends and not as master and servant, Jamil takes it and turns it into a rejection. Now given the -ugh- permission to speak his mind, he let his tongue lash out all the annoyance, anger, and exasperation he pushed down all those years. Did it help him become free? No. Did it sever the chain between them, the status of master and servant? No. But it did help him feel better after everything. And maybe, start something new.

Rowdy Parrot

| ShrimpySheep

You received a call from Jamil because he wanted to ask you a favor.

"I didn't want to bother you, but I'm really in need of someone who can deal with unruly animals." You heard a bird sound in the background of the call. "Did you hear him? In short, one of the parrots we used in yesterday's parade did not return to the keeper with the others. I'm trying to deal with the issue but- What are you doing with that plastic cup?" You hear the sound again, but it is slightly muffled. "Why is he shouting into that? *sigh* I think you understand. Can you help me? I can cook your favorite dish as a thank you. Don't throw the cup on the floor! Sorry."

You agree to help him while trying to contain your laughter. But when you told Grim he said straight away that he didn't want to go with you because he didn't want to deal with an annoying parrot, but he asked you to bring him anything Jamil cooks for him to eat. You left him in Ramshackle and went to Scarabia. As soon as you enter the dorm you see a large bird fly towards you. You get scared, but it lands on a table near you. "Hello" The bird says. You see it's a Red-and-green Macaw.



Jamil appears running down the hallway and slows down as he approaches you. “Hi.” He greets you as he catches his breath. “Sorry, he just flies wherever he wants.”

“Up. Up.” The parrot says as it opens and closes one of his feet. “I still don't understand what he means by this.” You notice that the parrot seems to be looking and pointing at your hands, so you reach out your hand towards the bird and it carefully climbs onto your hand without hurting you with its claws.

“I see, so Up means he wanted to climb onto someone's hand?”
“Did he say this many times?”

“He said this to me from time to time, but I thought he was telling me to look up. Can I ask you a favor? Can you watch over him while I call the keepers? I haven't even been able to have a conversation with anyone without-”

“Peekaboo!” The parrot interrupts. “This.” You laugh and the bird makes a sound as if he is laughing with you. “Well, he seems to like you enough. Entertain him for me for a moment, will you?” He smirks, turns and walks away while picking up his cell phone and looking for the parrot caretakers' number to call.

“Funny to tease.” The parrot tells you, with the same bird voice as before but showing you how intelligent he actually is. “Who're you?”

You introduce yourself and ask his name. “Gilbert. Call me Gil.”

“Why are you messing with Jamil, Gil?” “Funny to tease.” He repeats. “Likes you.” “Like me?”

He shakes his head. “No. He likes you. Smiled when he called you.” He flew from your hand to the ground and started walking somewhere. He approached a door, flew to the handle and with his foot and beak managed to open it. You went after him and entered... Jamil's room. “How did you...?”

Gil flew onto Jamil's bed and started jumping. “Hey, come on, don't mess up his bed.”

He messes up the bed a little more before flying to the desk, while you try to put it back together he walks over to the boombox, turns it on with his beak and a rap song starts playing. When you look, the parrot is dancing on the desk to the music. Jamil appears running at the door. “What happened? I asked you to watch him.”

“And I did!” You finish making the bed. “He was the one who opened the door and I don't even know how.” The parrot starts trying to imitate the voices of the music, but it's so fast that he can't even form coherent words, he can only imitate the sounds. This makes Jamil try to contain his giggle, but he ends up giving up and bursting out laughing. “At least he has good taste.” He says as he approaches the boombox to turn it off.



The parrot hopped around to turn it back on. Jamil turned it off again and kept his finger on the button. The parrot tried to remove his finger with its beak, but without using much force because you can see Jamil laughing. He pushed the parrot away with his hand, but it climbed onto it instead. Jamil straightened up, surprised, with the parrot in his hand.

“Good taste.” The bird repeated his words.

“They can come and get him today.” Jamil tells you. “Until then I have time to cook what I promised you.”

“Likes you.” The parrot says. “Like me?” Jamil looks confused. You make a gesture as if to tell him not mind that. The two of you go to the kitchen. Along the way the parrot climbs onto Jamil's shoulder. You see him smiling slightly, enjoying it. In the kitchen you say that you want or don't mind helping, but he insists that he cooks alone because it's his thanks for your help with the parrot. That and it's better that you continue keeping an eye on him.

“Gil.” The parrot says suddenly. You tell Jamil that that is the parrot's name.

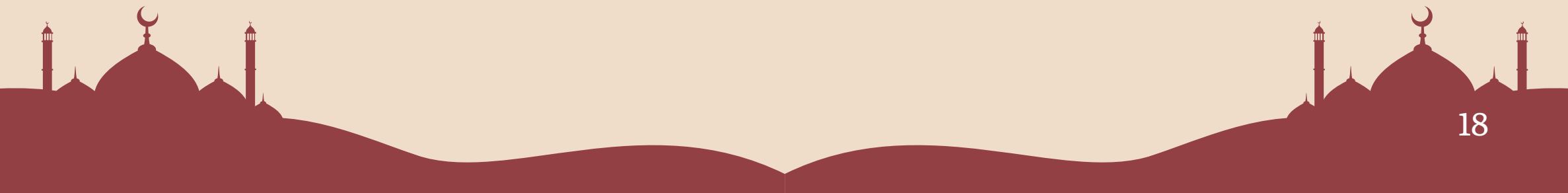
“Okay Gil, let's do it like this then: if you behave, I'll get you your favorite snack before you leave. Deal?” The parrot shakes its head up and down. “Let's hope so.” Jamil mutters to himself.

He started cooking while talking a little with you, answering your question about whether he would like to have a pet parrot one day. “It's said that the Sorcerer of the Sands kept one as his right-hand bird. I have done a lot of research into taking care of parrots, but a dorm isn't a good place to raise them. I might get one once I graduate.”

Then he looks at the ingredients and realizes that he forgot the next one on the shelf. He comments this out loud and suddenly Gil takes flight to that same shelf. You both get startled but Gil simply picks up the bag with the ingredient with his foot and takes it to Jamil, placing it on the table safe and sound. Jamil is speechless and clearly impressed. While he prepares your dinner, he asks the parrot for things like that as if he were his assistant. And a good one, by the way.

“I have to admit, you may not be able to speak like a human but you are very intelligent. You started behaving extremely well from the moment you knew you would be rewarded for it. I like that.” He smirks. “And now I wonder if your misbehaving before was premeditated so I would make this deal with you. *sigh* You're starting to remind me of someone we know.”

Once your dinner is ready, Jamil puts yours in a plastic container and Grim's in another. “I would invite you to dine with us, but something tells me that it would only bring you trouble with a certain hungry little guy waiting for you in your dorm.”



Meanwhile, the parrot's keeper arrives. But Gil refuses to climb onto his keeper's hand. Instead, he doesn't leave Jamil's shoulder. Jamil realizes that he wants the reward he was promised before leaving, he explains this to the keeper and asks what the bird's favorite snack is. “Oh, I see. Luckily his favorite snack isn't anything to fancy. He loves dates.”

“D-dates?! I... think we have a small bag of them in the cupboard. (Y/N), could you go get them please?” He tells you where it is and you find a package of dates. Jamil says they can take that package with them, but the parrot still doesn't leave his shoulder and just opens its beak and makes a sound like “aaah”.

“Oh, he wants you to feed him. Isn't that cute?” “He what?! Why would I-”

Gil makes a complaining sound in Jamil's ear and flies to the sink where there were some clean plates and glasses. He picks one up with his foot. The keeper warns that he seems to want to throw the glass cup on the floor.

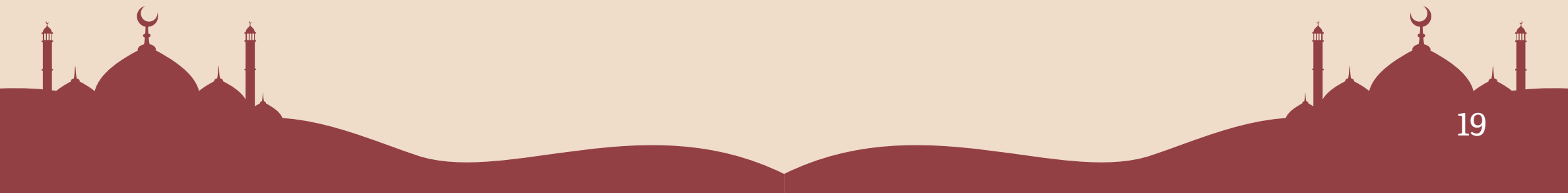
“FINE! Fine, I'll do it...” Jamil gives in.

You hold back your laughter as you watch Jamil trying to hide his disgust at touching the dates and his irritation at serving a bird. Before the parrot leaves, he lands on your shoulder and touches your cheek with his beak while making a kissing sound.

The keeper comments that he had never seen Gil like two people so much and the two leave accompanied by other Scarabia students.

“THE AUDACITY OF THAT BIRD!” Jamil complains when it's just the two of you in the kitchen and he knows the others are too far away to hear him. “What kind of training do these idio... keepers give it? I swear that if I ever have a parrot the consequences of doing this will be so severe that it will never dare to do such a thing to its master again!” He sees you looking at him with a disapproving look.

“...You didn't hear anything.” He says, calmer.





Vipers of a Single Scale

| QuillAffinity

“Big Brother!”

Even through the tinted windows of his rented car, Jamil could hear Najma clear as day. He groaned as he changed lanes to park near where she stood, rushing out of the car as soon as he shifted gears.

“Told you to wait for me inside!”

“Oh please! I’m not helpless, plus my luggage was right there in baggage claim.”

Despite his huffs and her exasperated eye rolls, the two Viper siblings embraced one another warmly. Aside from the occasional, holiday-induced video call it had been three years since the siblings had seen each other. Three years since Jamil had graduated from Night Raven College and three years since he, somehow, convinced Kalim to turn their familial relations upside down. Najma didn’t exactly know what had caused that absent-minded heir’s change of heart, but she was glad for it nonetheless.

Her brother was free. And nothing mattered more to her than that simple, glorious fact.

Jamil, having been released from a sacrificial fate, had opted to finally travel the world. Venturing from the Queendom of Roses to Sunset Savannah and even the Fantasia Havens. Sure their parents raged at and guilted him to come home, but Jamil was always stronger than they gave him credit for.

“Sevens, you stink.”

“You try smelling like roses after sixteen hours on a plane!” And yet, despite his protests, her brother still held her tightly, comfortingly. Airport stink still clung to her, sure, but this was still his little sister. She had gotten taller, tougher. Though he’d sooner eat a pound of dates before he admitted that. Much less tell her how proud he was that she made the solo journey to meet him in the faraway City of Gold.

Rather, Jamil opted to ruffle her already flyaway braid and place her luggage in the car. Najma wrinkled her nose at him and proceeded to unravel the travel-worn hairstyle. Raking her thin fingers through it as she climbed into the passenger seat.

After buckling herself in, Najma took a moment to survey the car’s interior. They say you could tell a lot about a guy from the inside of his car...and Jamil clearly kept his neat and tidy. Save for his backpack, which was packed tight and neat in the backseat with only a folded map sticking out of an exterior pocket.

But just as Najma was about to reach back to it so she could snoop, Jamil quickly climbed into the driver's seat and stepped on his seatbelt. He checked the mirror once, twice before beginning to pull out into traffic.

“Did you eat on the plane?” He asked without taking his eyes off the road, his long, partially braided hair loose and flowing over his shoulders. He seemed...sturdier. Calmer in a way that Najma was overjoyed and a little relieved to see.

“I mean, I had some juice but after all that turbulence I didn't think my stomach seemed up to it.” Her brother cut a sharp glance towards her, silently reprimanding her in a way only he could be. Najma, however, opted to simply look out the window and into the huge metropolis they found themselves in. The City of Gold was known far and wide as one of the richest cities in the world and boasted almost countless landmarks never found anywhere else.

“I'll take you somewhere easy on your stomach, then we can rest at my place for a bit.”

Buildings stretched before Najma, taller than anything she'd ever seen. But it seemed her older brother was at complete ease amongst all the dazzling architecture and glittering cityscape. Which, she thought, was rather fitting. He never had a very easy life. How could you when your sole purpose was to live for someone else?

Even if the Asim heir treated him kindly, even if he was occasionally considerate, such a life was little else but an ever-present hot-iron shackle around his leg. Keeping him bound to the desolate ground. But now Jamil was free. Better yet, he was safe. And this is just what her brother looked like, acted like with no worries...

It suited him.

Their parents were against her even coming to visit him. For three years they sprung every guilt trip in the book to keep her in Silk City and as far away from her brother as possible. And, though Najma was ashamed to admit it, there were times when she hated the fact he left, that he turned their family upside down. Leaving her behind to face the brunt of the fallout. But without overturning the bed one makes, how else can you find the vermin hiding underneath?

“We're here.”

'Here' referred to a neat, somewhat retro-looking restaurant tucked under an apartment complex. Her brother expertly exited the car on the street side while Najma, somewhat clumsily, clambered out onto the nearby sidewalk. It was loud there, the sounds of the city were filled with honking cars and all sorts of people chatting in all sorts of languages as they traveled to and fro. Jamil walked only a pace in front of her, far enough to scout for trouble but close enough to keep an eye on her.

Just like when they were kids.

She knew, as everyone comes to realize with age, that she must not have been an easy person to live with, to grow up with. Their parents never expected her to serve the Asim heir or any of his dozens of siblings.

No.

All their hope, all their restrictions, and all their rage were meant solely for the only brother Najma had in the entire world. She was exempt, free of any and all choking, gilded burden.

Or at least she was.

The Viper siblings entered the restaurant, Jamil holding the door open as he always did, and were met by a cozy and clean atmosphere. The furniture was bright and stylized but still comfortable. And, in place of servers checking on each table every so often, there appeared to be a simple counter set up in the front to order from. Najma smiled a bit wryly, leave it to her brother to find a place where they could be as unbothered as possible.

She took a look at the half-full restaurant and quickly selected a corner booth for the two to sit at while Jamil made his way over to grab the menus at the front. Anxiety churned in Najma's gut. Her brother was happy for maybe the first time in his entire life...how dare she come in and interrupt that? How dare she intrude onto his peace with her chaos? How dare she bring her new wounds in the face of his countless scars?

"Here, order as much as you want. It's on me."

"But-!"

"Nope. Older sibling rules."

And that was that. Najma sighed and tried, and failed, not to smile at her older brother's care for her. As Jamil took a seat across from her, he was the very picture of nonchalance. And that just made the anxiety in her gut start whirling even faster.

But it wasn't as if she could spill her heart out now. Yeah. Yeah, they should eat first and then maybe...No, Jamil should get some more rest before she...But, then again, would telling him first thing in the morning really be the kinder option-

"Just say it Najma." She froze. The thin, laminated menu slipping from her fingers.

"What? I didn't say anything."

"I know. That's the problem." Jamil's eyes snapped hers in a sharp, but not merciless strike. They were gray, like hers. Like their father's. But Jamil's were the glint of a knife hidden under a pillow. A remnant of moonlight burned into one's eye. Najma's lips wobbled ever so slightly as she swallowed thickly.

One breath. Two.

“They want me to get married. After I graduate. No college, no career, no-” Her hands flew to her mouth. Najma couldn’t look at him. The tears veiling her eyes were already too thick to see him clearly. But the words tumbled out anyway, her curled fingers be damned.

“They said that with you gone someone had to take responsibility for the family.” No! Stop, it’s not his fault! “That someone has to make sure that there will be more Vipers to toss towards the Asims. That I’ve been this pamper princess long enough and that I need to finally repay Mom and Dad for all my years of-”

“Najma.” Like a hiss, full-fanged and straight to the heart, came Jamil’s call of her name. Bringing her back to her senses like a bite wound. Then it was easier to look at him, to let him come to her side, hold her hands, and hug her. Oh.

She missed his hugs.

Her big brother never knew how to hold gently, he always held tightly. Like he was afraid of losing whoever or whatever he brought into his arms. The warmth of his embrace, his strong grip against her frame brought breath back into her lungs. And what else could she do but hold him back? For three years she missed this. For three years she was left behind, alone.

But now?

Jamil pressed a heavy kiss to her temple, a scarred palm moving over her messing hair soothingly. The Viper siblings simply held each other for a long moment. Tears falling softly, embrace unrelenting. Snakes, vipers, were seldom ever seen favorably by the world. Too dangerous, too vile, too frightening to be left alone and alive. Cold-blooded little things had to huddle close to one another for warmth, for comfort.

And that’s just what they did.

When the pair finally did speak again, their voices were soft. Soft with emotion, soft with guilt, soft with the resolve to do better by each other.

To never again let each other go back to a cage in exchange for the other.

“You don’t, won’t have to. I swear it.”

“But I can’t let you go back to that...to them Jamil!”

“I’m not. I’m going back for you and I am leaving with you.”



Sevens, what a stupid little sister he had, Jamil thought. She looked a mess with her hair all mussed and her kohl liner streaking down her smooth face. How could she ever dream he'd do nothing in the face of her distress, her pain? She was his sister. His baby sister who always trailed after him. Who always stole his food and used up all the hot water. There was nothing he wouldn't do for the little dummy.

So what if he had to have another showdown with his parents? So what if he needed to raze their house to the ground to finally drill into their thick skulls the fact that times had changed? That he had changed them with his own blood, sweat, and tears? Filial piety was a load of camel shit when both parents felt entitled to cause pain like this. Those two would die before him anyway. And then who'd he have, at the beginning and end of the world?

His sister. His dumb baby sister.

"I'm with you, Najma. I'll always be with you."





The Ones from the Scalding Sands

| Ner

What should one say of the Scarabia dorm? How could one describe that which makes the dorm what it is?

One could talk about the locale itself - the pocket dimension where the members of the dorm reside, beyond the Hall of Mirrors.

One could talk about the shifting sands, the dunes that pile high right outside the ramparts and the rocky outcroppings. The growing things, the lonely palm trees, perhaps some scurrying critters. The things that live and thrive despite the harshness of their surroundings – and the things you'll do well to be careful not to trample underfoot.

Yet, even in this kind of environment, there are havens. The invigorating oasis among the dunes, surrounded by lush greenery. The dorm buildings themselves, made to provide shelter from the elements – no matter how relentless the surroundings may be.

One could talk about the ornate beauty of the dorm's construction. The white walls that gleam in the sun, their thickness keeping at bay both the burn of the day and the chill of the night. The bulbous red domes that rise high above, inlaid with glittering gold. The slender towers that reach high to the clear blue skies, striking beacons amidst the yellow-brown sands.

One could talk about the path that takes you to the courtyard like a red carpet. The open halls around the courtyard, with their vaulted openings that are lined with yet more gold. The large fountain, a solace in the arid landscape. Beyond it all, a pair of imposing doors, large enough to accept a whole contingent at once.

All of which is here to tell you of the majesty of this place – and of the wealth behind its construction.

In short, one could talk about the dorm which is a warm and clear-skied refuge, even when the campus itself is in the throes of the coldest island winter.

One could also talk about the students. Of course, the dorm would be nothing without the people that it is made of.

And what students they are.

One could talk about how they embody the mindfulness of the Sorcerer of the Sands, how they tend towards careful deliberation. How they form a group with shining, applied intellect, known throughout the campus to be among the best when it comes to testing their knowledge.

One could talk about how so many of them are capable of looking to the stars for guidance, of divining what is coming their way. How, in them, the spirit of Night Raven College joins with the legacy of the Sorcerer of the Sands – how they're proud as any other students on campus, but not ones to act rashly and without considering their options.

And, in talking about the members of the dorm, one would be remiss not to consider their leaders. The pair that guides the rest of the crew, and who are so intrinsically tangled with each other.

One, bright as the sun, relentlessly shining no matter what comes his way. The other, catching what slips through the cracks, keeping the wheels in motion.

One, welcoming you with wide arms, handing out both treasures and light words with the same easy measure. One who's born to such comfort, yet wants to ease the loads of others. One who's not without his troubles, but chooses to look past them – no matter what it takes. One who will not allow himself anything less than thriving, no matter the harshness of his surroundings.

The other, filing away your dangers and weak points alike, only allowing you closer after a thorough vetting. Who keeps his cards close to his chest, yet conceals such passion behind the constraining mask. Whose mind is always working, preparing for every probable and improbable scenario.

Who may well have been trampled underfoot far too many times, his sufferance long since run out.

One could talk about how the pair has been bound together since childhood, tangled in a web of expectations neither of them can easily leave. How they know each other better than anyone else does – yet perhaps not well at all.

One could talk about how they both look after the other, as misguided and throttling as it may be. How each tries to direct the other to better things, to paths neither of them chose.

After all, who truly is leading – the master or the servant?

Which one of them is the driving force, which the guiding hand? Who gets whatever he wants, who is there to always rein the other in?

Who is carrying the weight of them both – and who is taking them wherever he wishes, no matter the guidance he receives?

Who is the one dependent on the other? Who doesn't dare let that change?

Who's at the center of the galaxy – and who's trying to break away from their orbit, as impossible as it may seem?



Turmeric and Disenchantment

Dio

CW: References to Animal Abuse/Negligence, Euthanasia, Retroactive Guilt and Pet Grief

It all started with a jar of turmeric.

According to Kalim's rapidfire rambling, the Ramshackle Dormitory got saddled with a litter of flea-ridden orphaned kittens. Since the Prefect had exceeded their monthly allowance to buy milk, they asked him for some help.

Of course they would take advantage of the dorm leader's bleeding heart. At least Jamil was quick enough to stop him from donating the entire jar.

When Kalim returned, he gushed nonstop. There were five of the wriggly things. With folded ears and shut eyes, and impressively loud despite being palm-sized.

"—you should've seen how they all turned yellow, especially the black and white one! It looked like an oversized bee—"

"Tell me if you get bitten. We can't have fleas infesting the dorm." Jamil held back a shudder at the thought. He'll need to add some citronella oil for Kalim's evening bath and throw his clothes into the wash immediately after this. He couldn't take any chances.

"Okay, Jamil—By the way, would you wanna visit them tomorrow after classes?"

Oh dear.

First, came the innocuous requests to check up on the things. Then the musing and the daydreaming. And then, of course, he'd feel compelled to adopt one. Or all five of them.

Jamil needed to nip this in the bud. "Sure." (Who was he kidding, it was too late. Kalim was utterly entranced with the things. And Jamil would be lying if he said he wasn't curious.)

The two of them stayed at Ramshackle until night had fallen. Kalim struggled to get the fifth kitten to latch onto the bottle. His brow was furrowed, lips pursed in concentration as the neonate mewled and wailed in one of his palms. With the bottle tilted downwards in his other hand, milk trickled down his wrist and onto the floor. "Come on, don't be so fussy, your dinner's right here..."

Jamil easily could've wiped up that mess, but he was stuck as a makeshift pillow for the remaining four. A plump, purring puddle of black, white, and orange on his lap. He idly stroked the top of the kitten's head, one of the white kittens with splotches of orange tabby markings.

After some agonizing moments of watching Kalim muttering to the thing, the kitten miraculously found the bottletip. Its front paws curled around the bottle while he cradled it in his palm.

It was a frail, tiny thing.

"Hey Jamil, remember when Aunt Farah would bring over her cats?"

He nodded. "They were actually older than this." They were beautiful Persian cats. A mellow cloud and her hyperactive cotton ball offsprings. Alongside one of the older servants, he was lightly chiding Kalim to be gentle, to not get overexcited.

Kalim's aunt was the type of relative who brought lavish gifts for everyone. Whenever she visited, she'd have an array of bags hanging from both of her arms. She made sure that everyone in the room would receive something—snacks, toys, clothes, a quirky trinket, or a hand-me-down from her own children—a textbook example of a perfect guest. Greatly favored by family and the servants during reunions, and especially by Kalim and his siblings.

(While Kalim and Jamil watched the kittens tear across the ornate rugs and bump into furniture, the aunt went on about the circle of cat breeders she purchased the parents from. Their pedigree, their decorated history as show cats.)

"I can't wait to see them open their eyes..." Kalim mused. Grim grumbled from his spot on the sofa.

"Feeling neglected, are we?" Jamil found solace in teasing Grim.

"No! They keep cryin' through the night, ever since we've taken 'em in!" A part of him sympathized with the fatigue that shadowed Grim's features. "You could find someone to—"

The runt's high-pitched crying resumed with renewed vigor and thrashing, surprising Kalim. The bottle fumbled in his hold. "Oh no! What's wrong?"

"It's still hungry," Jamil said. He started scooping up the kittens and placing them next to Grim, who had his paws pressed over his ears.

"But it's not taking the bottle..." Kalim set the kitten down, its little head nudged against his palm in between meows. "Did the milk already go cold?"

"Kalim, wait, I'll come to you—"



At that moment, Yuu returned from cleaning up the kitchen. With a practiced motion, they set the kitten on its stomach and it quickly took the bottle with no further complaint.

“Is it easier for them to drink like that?” Kalim asked.

Yuu explained that it was the most natural position for them, that holding them like a baby risked the kitten inhaling milk into its lungs.

“Oh.” Kalim’s omnipresent smile faded. “I...didn’t know that.”

Jamil’s reflex to placate kicked in. “We were only children when your aunt visited...” Neither of them could know any better.

(Well, even as kids, they could sense that Aunt Farah’s love was hollow for her pets. As if these living beings were like the luxury brands that decorated her walk-in closets, like mere seasonal trends.)

Kalim’s gaze was glued to the runt, watching it drink barely a quarter of the milk. “That–That’s not enough...” He turned to the Prefect. “Can’t you make it drink some more, at least until half the bottle’s finished?”

He had a way of making big pleas sound like simple requests.

“They’ll be due for another feeding later,” Jamil said, scanning Kalim’s hands for scratches. Only faint lines, but his palm was sticky from spilled milk.

Yuu sighed tiredly in agreement. Not quite defeated, but as if they were bracing for the worst.

“Jamil and I could help you look for vets. No need to worry about shouldering the cost—”

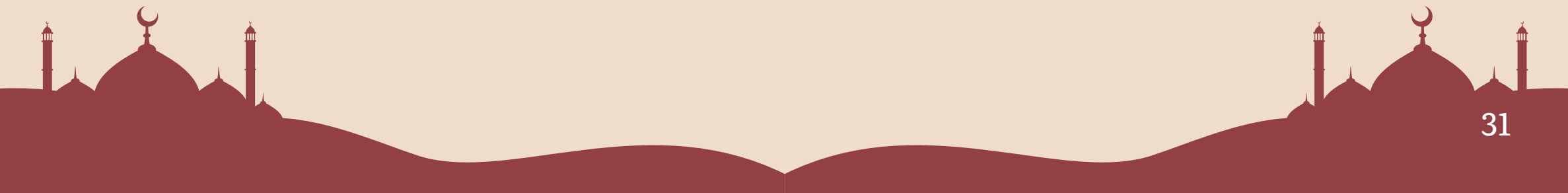
Yuu interrupted Kalim. The both of them were already plenty of help today. At the very least, this kitten needed more care and attention than the rest.

That was their cue to leave. “It’s almost curfew,” Jamil said. “We can visit another time.”

After they washed up, Kalim bid the Ramshackle duo goodbye with a strained smile.

(The servants back at the estate were quick to hide any animal deaths from the young heir. Any sick animals were put to sleep or taken away to keep him from seeing their suffering.)

The walk back to Scarabia was far from silent. Kalim buzzed with suggestions to help Grim and the Prefect. Which were good ideas, if it weren’t for the fact that—



“You can’t give them round-the-clock care while juggling your school responsibilities.” Kalim stopped in his tracks. “Am I supposed to just...accept that they might...?”

Yes. For his own sake. Jamil thought. “The Prefect had it under control. We shouldn’t overstep.”

“Man, I don’t know much about taking care of baby animals but...” Kalim made a short, frustrated sound. His hand scratched at the back of his head, bracelets clinking with the motion. “I just—it doesn’t feel fair. We can get them treatment, medicine, anything they’ll need but Yuu wouldn’t...!”

Calm and rational, Jamil could embody that. “In the worst case scenario, Yuu doesn’t want to prolong its suffering.”

“How can you just accept that, Jamil?”

He didn’t want to. Their lives were already filled with close brushes to death. Jamil couldn’t open any more room in his heart for another defenseless creature. The most he could do was to not get attached in the first place, to box up the sadness and pain, to keep it tucked away in the furthest corner of his mind.

Kalim continued as Jamil stayed silent, “remember when Aunt Farah started collecting Bengals afterwards? I pretended to be okay when she mentioned the...accidents.” He almost looked haunted at the memory, voice wavering as he spoke. “But I keep thinking of her old cats, and I wonder if things would’ve been different if we adopted them...”

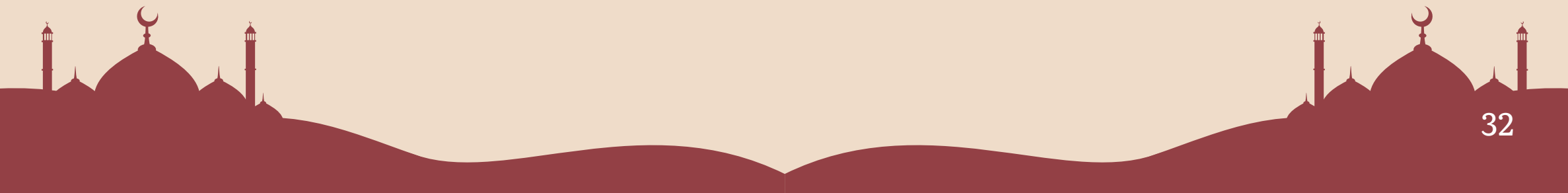
A part of Jamil expected himself to feel angry at being expected to play caretaker again. Then he remembered how they were both subjected to the constant threats against rabies, tetanus, ringworm. Like neither of them were trusted to fully care for a pet.

“Wouldn’t it be better to still try?”

But watching Kalim clumsily bottlefeed the scrawny kitten was almost enough to drown out the warnings that were instilled in them. Maybe it was a good thing that Kalim’s bleeding heart persisted, that he steadfastly clung to kindness in a world of jaded and apathetic adults.

“...You have a point. But we might have more luck searching for someone to foster them.”

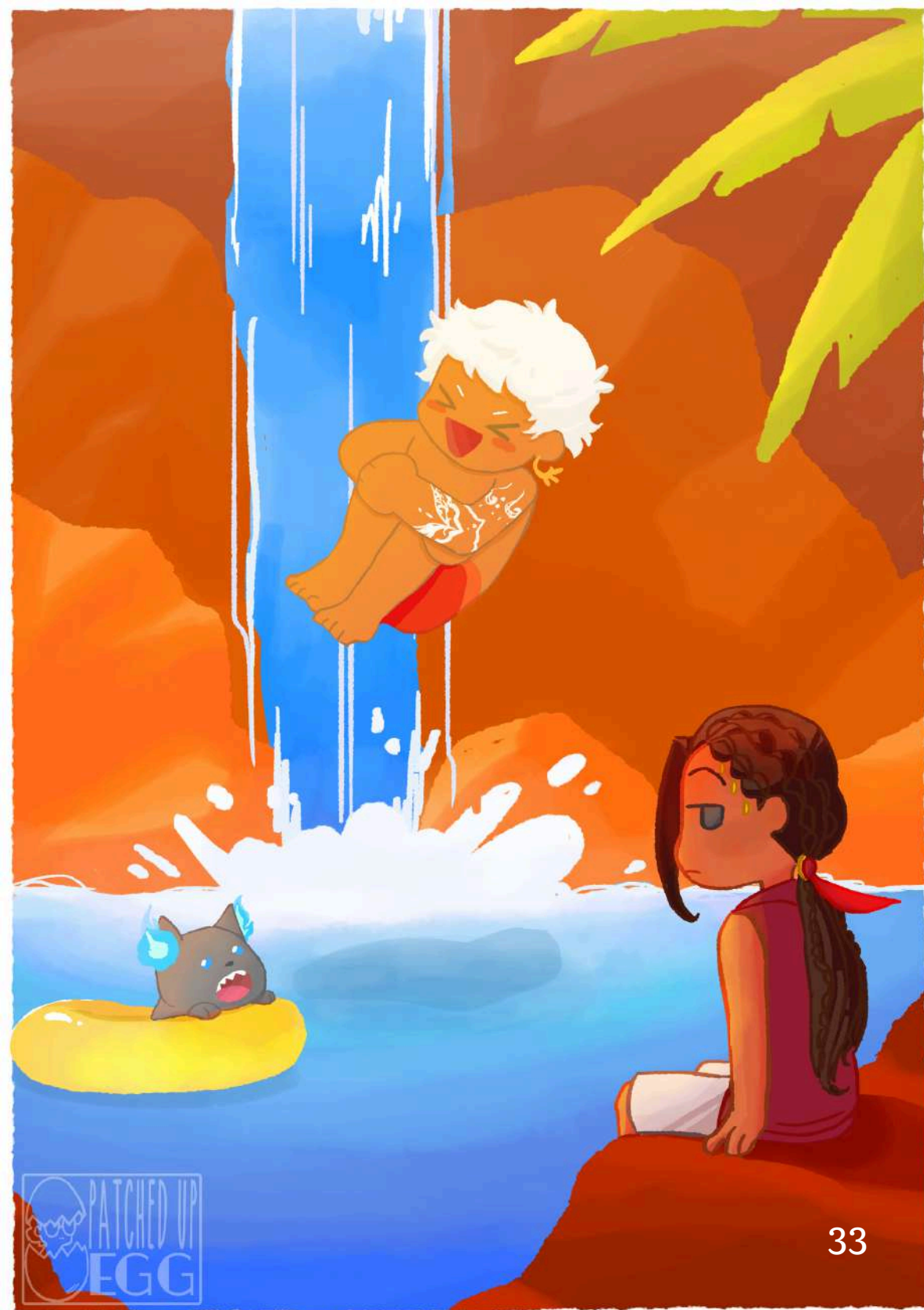
At Jamil’s reply, Kalim’s face brightened up. “Then...!”



“Not us!”

“Aww...” In spite of his pout, he looked happier once they reached the mirror to Scarabia.

For once in his life, Jamil couldn't muster any further protest in following Kalim's whims. He did have a way of making idealism seem infectious and simple.



Grit Your Teeth And Bear It

| QuillAffinity

Kalim knew.

He knew the only reason he got into Night Raven College was because of his wealth. He knew how the various academic achievements he received in his youth came to be. And he knew, painfully well like a fist to the face, that his best friend wasn't really his best friend. That's why he's here.

What was it like to live without Jamil? To not have the glint of his hair ornaments in the corner of his eye? To turn to his right (always his right, ever since Kalim had sprained that ankle trying and failing to copy Jamil's dance moves) and not have his eyes meet those familiar grey ones? It wasn't as if Kalim wanted to find the answer to those questions, it was because he had to.

The first thing his Blot-mandated therapist had told him to do was to put as much distance between him and his childhood friend as possible. Kalim had tried to weasel out of the request (a reasonable one, he reminded himself) with a goofy smile and a glittering laugh as he always did. But the professional had stayed firm. Even worse, he had made sense.

"Jamil Viper's actions and blot are his, and his alone. And he should be given the time, space, and breathing room necessary to process the reasons and consequences of those actions."

It had almost sounded like one of the Queen of Hearts' judicial sentences Kalim was supposed to study for history class. And try as Kalim might to imagine a life without Jamil, the actuality of it was chillingly foreign. But if that's what was best for his closest friend, how dare Kalim fail to even try?

So here Kalim was. In his dorm lounge with the Pop Music Club (with people he really did love a lot) on what was usually his and Jamil's weekly movie nights. "Squeee! Kalim, you've never told me how cozy your lounge is!"

"I agree! Why...if I were any smaller and cuter, I'd just about be smothered by this throw pillow." Cater and Lilia marveled cheerfully and, to Kalim's joy, loudly. Focusing on them, on being a good host (as a good housewarden ought to be) was the perfect distraction Kalim needed from the dark water of his thoughts. Painting on a gilded smile, Kalim left Scarabia's well-stocked kitchen with several snacks in careful tow. He had just inspected and opened every package himself and found nothing amiss. Of course, without Jamil here, there'd always be a riptide of insecurity and anxiety surging within the young heir.

Just another one of his many faults.

“Sorry, it took so long! But I thought that we’d have some snacks from my - our hometown!” Kalim called as he carefully carried a full tray of goodies to where Cater and Lilia were. As this was their first-ever ‘Pop Music Sleepover’ all of them came dressed comfortably in their pajamas. Cater, with his bright hair down in soft-looking waves was currently taking photos of the bright moonlight streaming in from the marble terraces. Lilia, in a full nightdress and sleeping cap, was currently building a pillow fort? chair? for himself. At the mention of food, however, they both looked eagerly towards the housewarden.

“Let’s see...I got a mix of baklava for Lilia, some rolled grape leaves for Cater, and I wasn’t sure what paired well with both so I got some pita chips and hummus, vegetables, mango pickles, dried fruit and nuts, and a spiced tea loaf Jamil, uh, made.”

Kalim was glad neither of his clubmates noticed his slip-ups, both of them too eager to dig into the generous piles of food on the gilded tray before them. Munching on a delicate, vinegary roll of grape leaves, Cater wordlessly handed his large-screened laptop to Kalim so he could select the movie. Upon receiving the device the rapids of Kalim’s mind suddenly stilled.

He hadn’t thought about this.

This was usually a time-honored tradition between him and Jamil. Fridays were movie nights. It was an inescapable truth of the world, like gravity or Jamil’s fear of bugs.

The one day a week where both of them (hopefully both of them, Kalim thought) could relax and watch familiar movies in a familiar language. Sensing that Cater and Lilia were eager to start the movie portion of their sleepover, Kalim selected the first film he could think of.

Om Shanti Om.

Cater looked over the housewarden’s shoulder, not bothering to read the small synopsis next to the play button. The logo for the movie had a very 70s sort of flair and those who appeared to be the male and female leads were incredibly attractive. Lilia had just polished off his second piece of baklava when Kalim hit the play button. In truth, both of Kalim’s clubmates knew something was going on. They had heard about Jamil’s Overblot, of course, but neither believed broaching such a topic would prove beneficial. Especially if Kalim was unwilling to broach the topic himself.

Cater disliked when people pried into his relationships like hungry hands prying open a pomegranate, so how could he turn around and try to do that to his clubmate? Talk about two-faced. And Lilia? Lilia was older than either of them knew, and he had long since resigned himself to the knowledge that he’d be dead before seeing his boys grow up into proper adults. It pained him, sure, but time lessened the worst of it.

And that was the best thing he could give Kalim right now.

Lilia sobbed softly into an embroidered handkerchief as Om ran fearlessly into the fire to save Shanti, disregarding his own life for hers. It had been a long time since a film had affected him so strongly, and, as he glanced toward his clubmates, it seemed that was a common sentiment. Cater had his long legs folded up close to his chest, obscuring half of his face as he rubbed at his nose, watching the film with rapt attention.

As Om reached out his hand, bloodied and beaten near-death, Shanti gave a glowing smile. Tears in her eyes, she reached for the one person she could trust at the end of the world.

Then it all blew up.

Kalim always flinched at that part, but now he could barely muster a twitch. He knew the rest of the movie like the back of his hand, he and Jamil had seen it so many times after all. Instead, Kalim found himself deep in thought at the sheer depth of Om's devotion. Did he have someone, anyone who would be just as genuine towards him?

If you had asked him just two weeks earlier, he would've answered with Jamil's name in a heartbeat. But now? A tightness formed around Kalim's throat like a satin cord pulling tight against his windpipe. And, before he could stop them, tears veiled his eyes as the world blurred and shifted and stopped making sense once again. He heard a sharp click of laptop keys and a hand on his right shoulder.

"Kalim? Buddy, hey, it's ok..." While Cater's voice was as soft as could be, he still couldn't hide his shock at the emotional display. Which, in turn, just made Kalim more emotional.

He was supposed to be a good host. He was supposed to be a good friend. He was supposed to give Jamil space. The housewarden pressed his hands to his mouth hard enough to feel the blunt of his teeth dig into the inside of his lip, he closed his eyes.

Get it together already!

As Kalim squeezed his eyes shut, large tears fell in a rain shower from his white lashes. From his left he heard Lilia let out a soft, comforting shush as he pulled the housewarden into his arms. Oh, how could Kalim have missed it? How could he have been so ignorant? Jamil had been in so much pain for so long...a puppet for all Kalim's stupid whims!

Every impromptu party, ever stupidly extravagant purchase - they had all fallen atop Jamil like boulders. He didn't have room to breathe, much less protest! What agony it must have been to have seen him flaunting about and carefree while he had to remain steadfast and ready at every moment.

"Easy...just breathe..." Lilia's deep voice hushed in a tone so gentle, he couldn't help but obey. Kalim felt Cater rub soothing strokes along his back, helping his gasping sobs ease into breathy tears. But the white-hot pain of his many mistakes didn't, wouldn't retreat.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, I just-” “You’ll do better.” Kalim sniffled as he began breathing easier, collecting himself like a child with a broken toy.

He made sure to reach back to squeeze Cater’s hand in thankfulness for the offered comfort, and, to his surprise, Cater kept his hand. It was steady, warm. And Kalim was even more grateful to have him as a friend in that moment.

Whatever that title meant now.

“Ah...must you young folk always believe in totality?” The housewarden leaned back as he looked towards Lilia to explain those clipped words. The Diasomnia vice-housewarden smiled softly and brushed mellow fingers through Kalim’s hair. Alizarin eyes lamp-like in the dark.

Lilia had a habit of doing this. Speaking about the past like it was some far-away fairytale. Referring to his classmates like he was a near-death star just passing through their skies. Kalim, secretly, despised it whenever Lilia would speak like this. Partially because he couldn’t help the slight tinge of existentialist fear that would prick his heart at his friend’s words and partially because he disliked being spoken down to when not purposefully playing the fool.

Cater, on the other hand, appreciated Lilia’s little old man asides. He guessed, better than most, that Lilia spoke from having experienced a long, rough life full of broken relationships. Having gone through something like that, how could anyone really trust even more people with their heart? Sigh. These guys were just made outta stronger stuff, Cater supposed.

“Relationships change...just like everything else worthy of love. You’ve overlooked quite a bit till now, but now you have the opportunity to pay better attention.”

Attention....he had deluded himself into thinking he’d given Jamil all his friendly attention up until now. But what a lie that was! Comforting to no one except his stupid, willfully ignorant self. Could he really hope to do better now? With so much muck and blood between them, how could they ever see eye-to-eye?

Did Kalim even deserve that much?

“You and Jamil have known one another your entire lives, any relationship from life to death can never be easy.” Life to death huh? Kalim held his clubmate’s hands for a long moment, scarlet eyes dark in thought. He took a long breath, then two. The Sacrabian housewarden felt Cater’s thumb rub comfortingly over his knuckles as Lilia gave a soft hum.

“Okay...Okay. Once Jamil wants to hear me, I’ll apologize for ignoring him for so long! I’ll pay better attention! I’ll do better! I’ll...I’ll...”

I'll become someone who cares for him like an actual person, like an actual friend, Kalim vowed. Holding his hands against his face, the young heir told himself he wouldn't cry.

But he did anyway.

The response was immediate. Lilia hugged him from the front, and Cater hugged him from the back. And while Kalim refused to forgive himself for his starring role in Jamil's pain, the support of his friends in this moment helped lessen the weight of it.



Ruminate

| Chris

It had been days since Jamil's overblot and everyone around them seemed to simply ignore what had happened, as if it never even happened at all. But Kalim still felt helpless, useless, impotent. Which was an almost new feeling for The Eldest Asim, he always had someone to count with any problem he might face, with a quick solution, however, he couldn't help but feel completely and utterly useless when said friend was the one with a problem.

Kalim couldn't take the events of that night out of his head, from the manipulation to being throw out by a corrupted version of one of the most important people in his life. It almost kept him awake at night, if weren't for his sleep to be so heavy.

Sighing again, he stared out at his drum in deep thought, unknowingly ignoring two of his closest friends. Deep red eyes stared at him intently, almost as if trying to read his mind before thin hands lifted close to his forehead, followed by a soft flick, making the white haired boy let out a surprised yet pained whine, quickly caressing it.

"There ya go. You got us worried." His orange haired friend commented, a worried expression visible on his face. Both Lilia and Cater were staring at him, seated beside his drums. "I don't think I've ever seen you so quiet."

Kalim blinked a bit in confusion before quickly shaking his head, giving them both a bright smile that didn't quite reach his eyes as normally. "Sorry!" He said a little bit too loud, making both juniors flinch slightly. While Lilia just nodded with a worried glint in his eyes, Cater stared at Kalim deeply, as if knowing exactly his thoughts.

The club continued their motions as normally, despite the awkwardness, till it was time to each go to their dorms, Lilia being the first to go as always, saying something about 'looking out for his children', causing the other two to just chuckle in confusion. The orange haired boy stared at his friend silently, the phone in his hand. He wanted to ask what was wrong, but at the same time he didn't know how to.

Cater was so focused in his own internal dilemma that he hadn't noticed the sophomore standing in front of him.

"Hey Cater." Kalim mumbled, a bit too quiet for the normally excited boy.

Cater looked up at him in surprise before quickly hiding with a smile. "Yeah? What's up?" He asked gently, standing up, both starting to walk out of the music room. Kalim stared at floor, fidgeting a bit as they walked.

"How did you feel after Riddle's overblot?"

The silence that followed was almost suffocating for both of them, Cater, who had stopped walking, stared at the floor for a bit. He knew exactly why he was questioning, every junior knew about the most recent overblot. Looking at the white haired boy, he could notice how much Jamil's overblot was affecting him.

Sighing, Cater resumed walking, Kalim following close behind. "At first, I was confused and scared, principally when seeing it face to face." He started, glancing at the shorter boy for a bit. "After it, I kinda felt... Shameful? I think that was it. It's just, everyone knows how overblot works and why it happens, but we never thought it could happen to one of our friends, ya know?"

Taking a deep breath, Cater stared at the mirror that lead to Heartslabyul, "After all that happened, me and Trey are helping Riddle to relax a bit more, take some weight out of his shoulders." He finished, staring at Kalim while putting a comforting hand on his shoulder before passing through the mirror, leaving the 2nd year student alone in his thoughts.

Some hours had passed, garnet-Red eyes stared intensely at the ceiling, already laying down at his bed. Kalim couldn't help but think constantly at what Cater had said earlier to him. 'Take some weight out of his shoulders'. Taking a time to recollect, the heir couldn't help but think of all the things his best friend had done for him in the past years, principally things he should be able to do by himself.

Take care of himself.

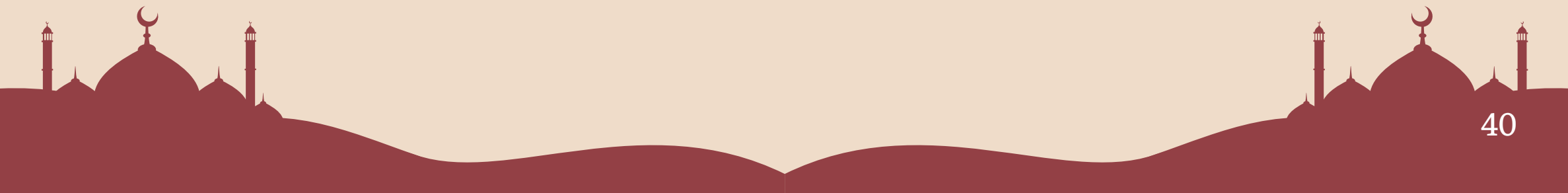
Sighing softly, Kalim lifted both of his hands, clenching it tightly as a new resolution came to his mind, his normal bright smile appearing in his face while holding back some giggles, to not wake up his roommate. He'd take care of himself now.

However, some things were easier said than done, Kalim thought as he stared at his vice-housewarden. Jamil's scowl was almost deadly, muttering angrily as he swiftly wrapped a gauze around Kalim's cut hand. "What were you thinking?" The brunette scoffed, staring up directly at the white haired boy, who flinched in surprise, feeling himself sweat.

He didn't know how answer, deciding to just look down at his bandaged hand. Jamil continued staring at him before sighing annoyed, pinching the bridge of his nose.

A long silence followed before Kalim whispered, almost inaudible to the long haired boy, "Do I bother you?" Jamil blinked in surprise, huffing a bit, "You could say so, Yeah." He answered back, in a neutral tone. After his overblot, he has been more honest than ever, which was kinda comforting to the heir.

When Kalim didn't say anything further, it finally clicked for Jamil. "Were you trying to do things by yourself because of it??"



His voice was exasperated, not sure if he was impressed or just plainly shocked. Kalim nodded, pouting a bit but the way his eyes shined showed an intense determination that Jamil knew very well. He couldn't help but sigh again, putting a hand over his eyes, while thinking of his next words.

"Look." He stopped, pursing his lips as garnet-red eyes finally looked up at him, he knew that Kalim wouldn't back down from this resolution. "... Next time you want to cook, I'll help you, okay?" Despite being an question, the way he said sounded more like an affirmation.

He didn't say he would make the food for Kalim, but help him do it. The eldest Asim blinked slowly as he processed the words before a soft chuckle escaped him, his arms quickly circling the taller boy. "Thanks!" He said excitedly, to which Jamil could only shake his head, the faintest smile in his face.

Cooking with Feeling

| Acim

Perhaps Jamil should've been surprised when the Prefect of Ramshackle came over to his dorm with that glutton of a monster, but how could he when they've been inviting themselves over for a while now? The Prefect, Yuu, was familiar with the kitchen as he was, often lending their services (which he denied, he's perfectly capable of cooking) and suggesting some tips from their own experience of cooking. And while Jamil wouldn't admit it, it's nice to have someone in the kitchen who's not only there for eating. It's...nice to exchange tips and recipes with a fellow chef.

When he was young, he loved to cook, experiment, and mix ingredients to see what flavors and dishes might come out. But the more he cooked for others and not for himself, the less his passion for the art grew and cooled into duty. It became something natural yet not really enjoyed. Not when he had to stress if they were poisoned or not, if they were perfect for the banquet or not, if they were acceptable or not. It cooled the flames of his passion, just like servitude had done to other things in his life. "Do you want my help now, Jamil?"

"For the umpteenth time Prefect, I am perfectly fine." Yuu rolled their eyes at him, which he ignored. While his eyes were on the stew he was stirring, he batted away the greedy paws of Grim. "Don't even think about it, Grim."

He heard him groan, “Myah, come on! That salmon looks so good! Just a little taste?”

“Down Grim, you’re gonna get salmonella if you eat it raw. Your monster biology be damned.” Yuu scolded their ward. Jamil hummed in agreement with them. He does not want to deal with a sick monster just because he refuses to listen. He doesn’t need another Kalim... although Kalim is better behaved than a monster. Grim grumbles to his side as Yuu, Jamil predicts, manhandles him to his seat. Just in time for Jamil to slide in the chopped salmon in the broth, stirring it with the mixture to mix. It took another few minutes for the dish to fully be finished before Jamil poured them into two bowls and served them to his two guests. “Eat up.”

Grim ate with no hesitation, downing the dish in seconds. Yuu was more refined in their eating, sipping from their spoon. Jamil waited for a bit before raising a brow, “So?”

“It’s tasty, not gonna lie—”

“This is YUMMERS!” Grim exclaimed, immediately handing his bowl—his very clean and empty bowl. “Seconds please!” Huh, Yuu must have beaten some manners into the monster. As expected of a beast tamer. For that, Jamil gives him a raised brow before pouring a second serving. “Thank you!”

“As I was saying,” Yuu continued after chuckling. “It’s tasty, the flavors blend well. Though maybe some spice should be added to it, the taste is...slippery to an extent. It’s quick to go away, so maybe something lingering would be good.”

“Hmm,” Jamil hummed in consideration. “Perhaps so, but seeing that we’re both accustomed to strong spices, it might go well for those who are not so...privy to it.”

“True, true, so what if...”

This is one of the few things why he likes the prefect, besides having a level-headed nature and being able to reign in the rowdiest of people to work together, they have a knack for food. A way with taste and mixing ingredients into something interestingly tasty. And perhaps it’s one of the reasons why he likes talking with them. He underestimated the prefect and their cunningness, a trait that is valued in NRC.

Yet in contrast, they were kind, a trait that is uncommon in his school. Yet the more he speaks with them, discussing recipes, possible mixtures, and the possibilities of dishes, he can feel the familiar warm feeling of joy that he hadn’t felt in a while. And the restlessness that came, the urge to try them out, to see their potential and the result, the excitement in cooking...he hadn’t felt it for a long time until now.



It was only after the prefect left with their monster that Jamil realized he was smiling, the ache in his cheeks from smiling foreign. He brought a hand to one of the corners of his lips, feeling the curve of his mouth before he let it fall. 'Maybe next time, I could use their assistance.'



Life With the Fool With the Gold(en Heart)

| Ner

Jamil never should have gotten that taste of freedom during his first months at NRC. Because now that he'd glimpsed it, had savored a taste of a world where he could simply be himself – simply Jamil Viper, not Jamil Viper the servant of Kalim Al-Asim... Now he could not forget it, could not let go of the sweetness of it all.

He never should've been allowed to dream of something different than constant servitude, because now he could not let go of that dream.

Oh, he'd keep up the charade, like he always had. He knew better than not to. But even as Jamil went through the motions, one eye and ear always on Kalim and his incessant needs, his mind was constantly working, constantly circling the frayed edges to find the thread to pull that would unravel it all.

Yet, it ground him down, bit by bit.

That fool and the way he threw money – or Jamil – at his problems.

The worst part was that Kalim didn't even realize what he was doing. How he was spilling gold and promises – of Jamil's time and effort, not his own – with the same ease others spilled empty platitudes. So lulled was Kalim in the knowledge that there was more where it came from, giving endlessly without considering he could one day run out.

It was infuriating, how Kalim trotted about the world in blind ignorance, never pausing once to exercise a modicum of judiciousness over the way he used his tools. Over the way Jamil paved Kalim's path, again and again, until it seemed the spoiled brat might forget to breathe if Jamil wasn't there to remind him of it.

“Kalim!”

Jamil tried to tamp down the panic choking at his throat, turning his voice into something strange and foreign.

If something happened, if Kalim got hurt, or worse...

No time to think about that now.

Jamil steeled himself, draping himself over the broom as he raced to where Kalim was precariously dangling.

He had to make it in time, he had to save Kalim, had to make sure everything was fine, had to-

The rush of relief was undeniable once they were both on the ground, safe and sound.

“Ahaha! I knew you’d catch me, Jamil!”

Oh how that careless laughter grated on Jamil’s ears.

“Next time I might not. You need to be more careful, Kalim.”

Why couldn’t this bumbling fool realize his actions had consequences – and not just for himself, but to those around him, too.

Jamil looked Kalim over, his hands soft as they adjusted Kalim’s clothes, checked to see for bruises and anything worse.

He was fine.

Thankfully, Kalim was fine.

Hearing voices from the kitchen, Jamil slowed his steps, lingering in the corridor.

“It’s weird, isn’t it? The way the housewarden is so demanding all of a sudden.”

“I suppose he really took our standings in the Spelldrive tournament and the midterm exams to heart.”

“Maybe... I just hope we can stop walking on eggshells around him soon. It gets tiring, never knowing what mood he’s in.”

“Yeah, seriously. He’ll be all nice and friendly one moment, then totally harsh the next. What gives?”

Perfect.

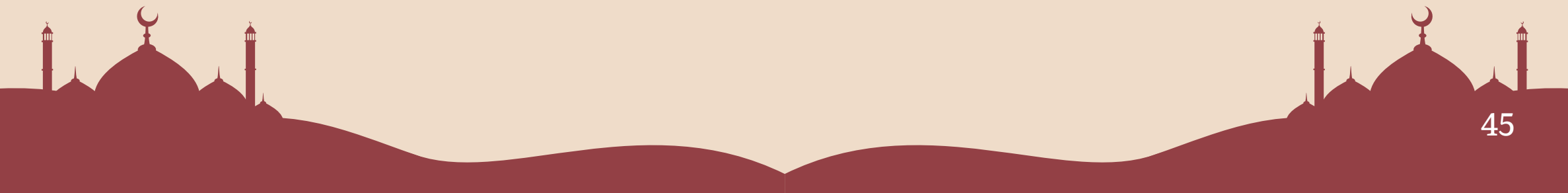
Jamil didn’t allow the satisfaction to show on his face as he stepped into the kitchen.

“Ah! V-Vice housewarden!”

“Yes? Is something the matter?”

“Ah, nothing! Nothing at all!”

Jamil got to work, directing the other students in making the meal just to Kalim’s tastes. Yet, even as he gave out instructions, overseeing the process, part of his mind was somewhere else.



What a fool Kalim was. Going about his days as if nothing was wrong, as if he wasn't seemingly losing his grip over himself.

Then again, Kalim had always been like that. Blind. Even – and especially – when it came to things concerning himself.

Jamil would've hoped that Kalim would choke on the food they were preparing, if that wouldn't have only brought on more problems.

Still, the idea of the bumbling idiot being out of Jamil's life, just like that...

It certainly was a satisfying thought.

“Vice Housewarden, will one tablespoon of spices be enough?”

“The housewarden's palate veers spicy. Add another teaspoon.”

But until then, until he was free, Jamil would do his job to utmost perfection. After all, everything depended on that.

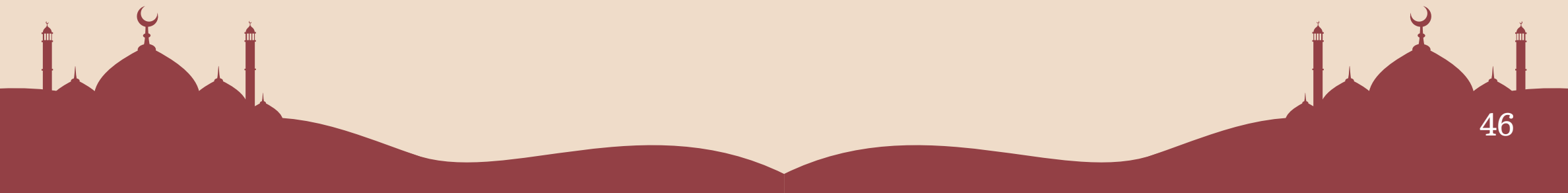
Everything.

And then, for once in Jamil's life, it seemed that fortune smiled upon him.

He truly meant it when he called the meeting with the Prefect fortuitous.

After all, he would welcome anything to push things along faster, to direct things on the right course.

The sooner he could end this bitter charade, the better.





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The Real You That I Want to Know

| Olive

| CW: Angst, Spoilers for Book 7

The scenery was very familiar, and homey. He could recall the day (was it the day? Or the hour? What was time outside of this place?) his baba showed him the gates of this school, the first school in the Scalding Sands, meant for his son and others to grow their abilities and become grand.

Kalim could recall his best friend's wide smile when he first changed into his uniform, matching together as he said, "Look at us, Kalim! Don't we match wonderfully? Now we can match all the time!" Kalim had never seen Jamil smile that wide before, so happy before, but then again, no of course he had, Jamil was his best friend in all of Twisted Wonderland, after all.

Of course, that can be nothing but a dream. Because Jamil... Jamil was his best friend, but Kalim wasn't his best friend. He wasn't even a friend. He was never a good friend, to begin with.

There were so many things that Jamil hated about him. And there were things about Jamil that Kalim hated too. Things about Jamil he never really knew he hated until they became revealed, like sand falling through the hourglass, to the endless bottom.

The behaviors Kalim never realized existed; Jamil's two-faced ways, how Jamil went about purposefully hindering himself in things to make sure that Kalim was elevated as directed by his parents, the brazen way he rebuffs Kalim's every attempt just to try and want to get along with him as Jamil is—

Kalim smacked his cheeks with his hands, "No! Stop! Thinking like that— Those are too deep right now, and besides, I got a job to do, Silver told me so!" He winced after doing that, immediately regretting it.

Kalim's face still hurt a little, Jamil had punched him super hard and kicked him, even after Kalim had gotten the jump on him. In all the years they'd known each other, this day was the first time they'd ever got into a brawl. Not like Kalim let him off easy either. He pulled on Jamil's hair, punched him in the face, and practically scratched his face like a cat does at the vet.

"I gotta blend into the dream, so Malleus doesn't notice, right? Hmm... But I can't exactly cover this up..." Do dreams have a pause button? Or was that fake Jamil looking for him?

No, they destroyed that fake Jamil. Kalim could picture that fake crumbling, practically melting away into nothingness after they'd successfully reminded him that Jamil was not like that.

But— his wish— or Malleus's ideal wish for him— was clearly that Jamil. He wanted to be friends with the real thing, that wasn't a lie.

However, Kalim wants the real Jamil, flaws and all. He wants the sneers, the mockery, the roll of the eyes. The idea of some fake plastically smiling at him...

It made him feel so sick to his stomach.

Maybe there was a way around that feeling. If Jamil is the center point of this wish, for this dream, he could just... wish him back. Then the dream would have to give “Jamil” to him because he’s the dreamer, and he wants something.

Kalim inhaled, then exhaled, opening his eyes and calling, “Jamiiiiiiil!! Where are youuuu?!”

“Kalim?!”

That– That was fast! Kalim didn’t expect a response so soon, especially since he thought it would’ve taken time to rebuild, but, suddenly, Kalim felt a body crash into his, a familiar pair of arms wrapping around his body, pulling him close.

He felt the other sag against him with relief, “You’re here; you’re back safely, good. I was so worried about you after those intruders took you away.”

The other Jamil pulled back after giving him a tight hug, putting his hands on his face to inspect Kalim’s face.

Kalim braced the sore feeling and smiled sheepishly at him, “Hi... Jamil. I’m okay, just a little sore.”

“Sore? What do you mean sore? Look at you, in these clothes... Now we don’t match anymore, that won’t do. Come on, I made sure there were spares in your room when you came back,” the other fretted over him, dark eyes surveying his face, what was once a cheerful voice full of worry.

Jamil used to worry over him, whenever he got injured, but it wasn’t necessarily for his sake. Jamil only got worried because it meant his throat was on the line if he failed. This Jamil, though, the fake Jamil... He was genuinely concerned.

Didn’t he always want Jamil to be his friend, to laugh with him, to spend time with him, and to tell him what was on his mind?

Kalim shook his head away from the thoughts and smiled, “Yeah... I got a little scraped up. Mind if you show me the infirmary?” He couldn’t recall if this dream school ever had an infirmary, but since he asked, one was likely created otherwise.

“Of course! Come on, I’ll get you patched up in no time flat, don’t you worry,” he reassured, wrapping his arm around Kalim’s and guiding him up the stairs of the immaculate palace.



Walking in silence gave Kalim time to look around, where it was rather sparse of students. How odd. While dreaming, he could recall so many students, security guards, and teachers...

Now, however, it was just them. The dream was probably still recovering from when Kalim tore himself away from the dream, or was hesitant to disturb what willingness Kalim displayed. Kalim leaned against the faux Jamil's arm, the other affectionately pulling him closer and humming, "You don't seem too badly injured, just scraped up and bruised... I can't believe those intruders were assassins in disguise. Honestly, looking like Night Raven College students? It's a new one, to be sure. But I'll remember it for next time."

Once into the infirmary, Kalim was guided to sit on the bed, where he watched the other move about the area, grabbing bandages and salve, before coming toward him with a cotton ball dipped in the salve, "This might sting a little and I'm sorry, but bear with it, okay?"

Kalim nodded, bracing but flinching when the cotton ball lightly dabbed on his cheek, "Hey, Jamil? We've... never fought before, have we?"

His question made the other blink in surprise, his concentration going from his cheek to his eyes, before that kind (and painfully real, for a fake) smile appeared, "Why would we ever fight, Kalim? We're best friends, and even if we get into a little disagreement about stuff, I wouldn't fight you."

"But you would still hypnotize me?" He asked, looking at the other, who grew quiet once again, but instead of shock, it was a familiar poker face, studying him, analyzing.

"...Like you did earlier, I mean. You wouldn't hurt me, but you'd move me regardless."

The silence that came from the faux Jamil as he observed him, pausing him in his caring stretched for a moment, before finally, he exhaled out of his nose, "... I was made to be your friend," he replied, softly, explaining it as though it were as real as a river, "Looking through everything, and your wish... I matched your wish for us to be friends. I made you so happy. Happy in days. Happier than he ever did."

Kalim shook his head, "It's true- you did make me happy. You- You did that. But you aren't the friend that I want to have. I want Jamil. The real Jamil. Sure, he's got a two-faced personality, and he's a little full of himself- Don't raise your eyebrow!"

The faux Jamil smoothed it out on command.



At that, Kalim wilted a little, fiddling with his fingers as he contemplated his words, “But... More than that... I cherish his honesty. I want him to be open with me. Complain to me, argue with me, hang out with me– It’s selfish, I know it is, but I... I want that Jamil.”

Kalim couldn’t lie. He couldn’t lie in Jamil’s dream, he couldn’t pretend. He wouldn’t tell the other about the plan (Silver trusted him, Silver was his friend, and he had to return that trust in kind) and he knew better than to push for him to use Snake Whisperer, so the best he could do was play into what faux Jamil was.

Faux Jamil was darkness, meant to be the caterer of his dream and his wish. Anything Kalim wished, he would do, just to make him happy.

(“My spell won’t be broken so easily... Kalim. Not as long as you exist in this world, Kalim!” The words before Jamil overblotted, going mad, madder than he’d ever been, having to be the servant, to cater to Kalim’s desires, making him suffer. And never once did Kalim Realize until it was Too Late.)

“... Can you... be him? At- At Night Raven College?” He asked, watching the other’s poker face melt to shock, “I want to see. What it would be like. Working towards friends with him, I mean. I know you want me to be friends with hi- you from the start, but I wanna try this. Please?”

The faux Jamil regarded him, before starting back on tending to his scrapes. They lulled in silence until he finished, and honestly, Kalim was bracing for the shutdown, before he spoke up, “I’ll do it. But. If I sense any kind of distress or you panicking, we go back.”

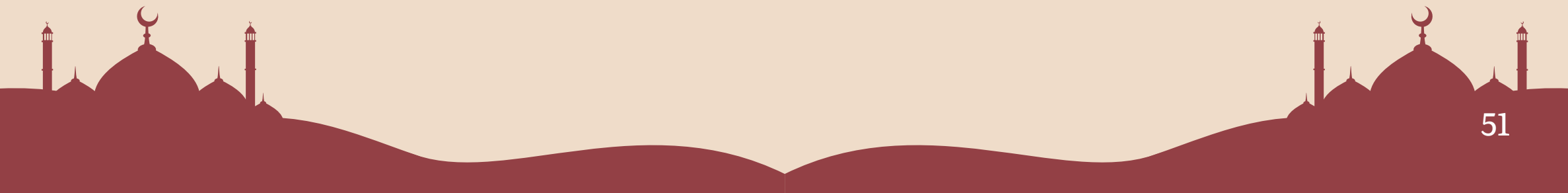
Kalim gasped, “You’ll do it?! Really?! Ohh, thank you, thank you, Jamil!”

The other smiled, “Of course I’ll do it. I’ll be as authentic as that other one. I still like the idea of us matching, so I guess it’s not too bad going to Scarabia as a change.”

He grabbed Kalim’s hands and lightly tugged, signaling Kalim to hop off the infirmary bed, “Now, it’s really simple to do this. Just imagine the dorm, the school. That’ll do the trick for the scenery and the people.”

Right! It sounded easy, and maybe Malleus wouldn’t get too suspicious since Jamil was doing his job; keeping Kalim happy and following his wishes.

Kalim closed his eyes and pictured it. Scarabia. Warm weather, brightness. The fanciful-looking dorm with all of their dorm mates. Filled with the smell of incense and spices. A familiar dryness, but not too burning.

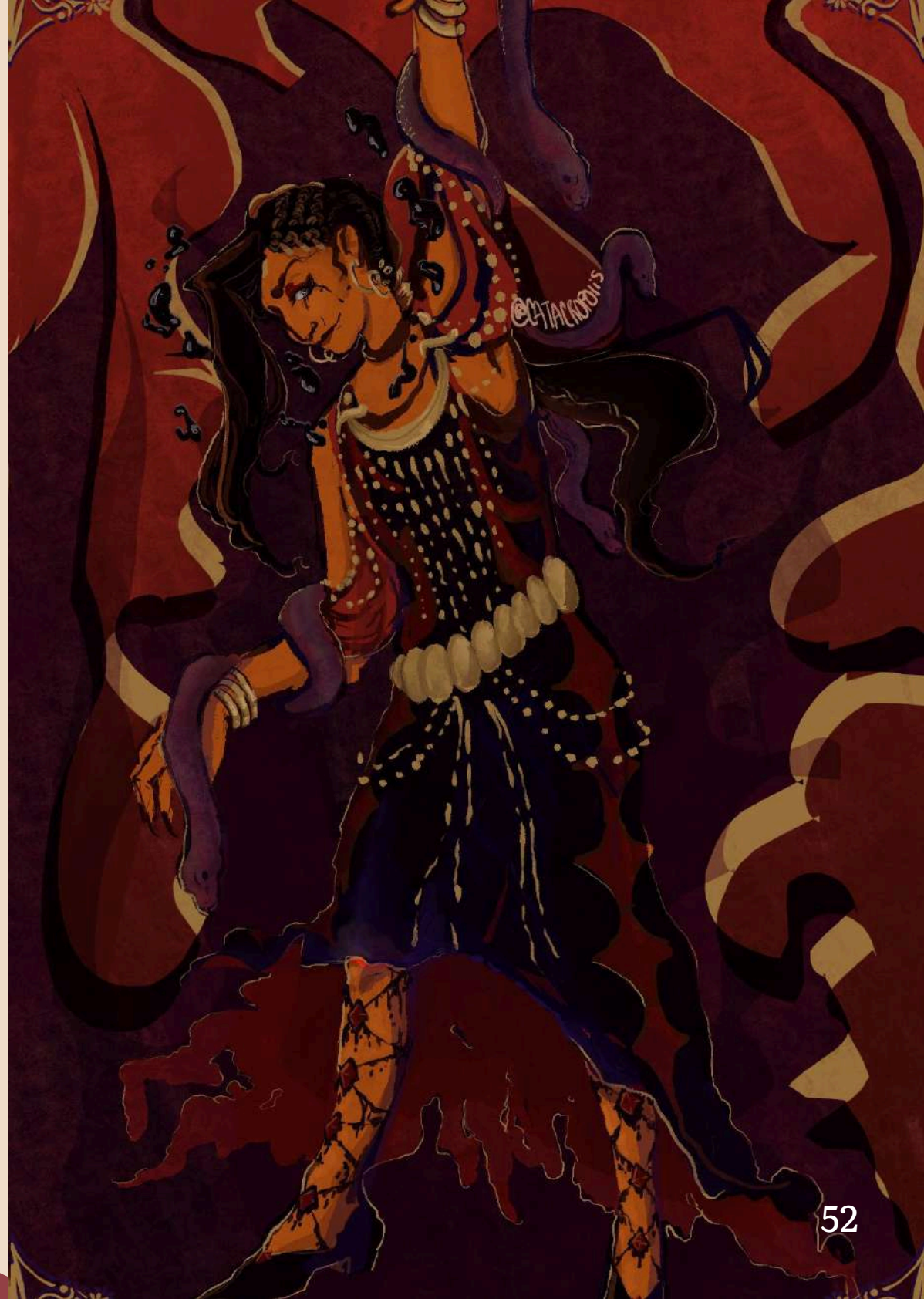


“You don’t need to picture me. I know what he wears, what he looks like.” The other assured, hands still holding his, “Just focus on the backdrop, like a play. I’ll play the part. I know you’ll succeed.”

Kalim breathed.

It wasn’t real. It wasn’t real, not yet. It wouldn’t be the real Jamil he would be working on befriending, it wouldn’t be his real friends he would be talking to, but it was... a practice of sorts.

A practice to get to know the real Jamil, in the real world, where they could truly, hopefully, finally, be real best friends.





VINTAGE

Streetwear



Grade AA Acting

| Fungi

Kalim can't do this. He REALLY doesn't think he can. All that work to get his first big role and for what? For the director to be constantly on his ass?

'Kalim, WHAT is your posture? You're a dancer, for Christ's sake! At least stand like one!'

'Brighten up your expression! This isn't a funeral!'

'Kalim, our mics can only pick up so much when you're not PROJECTING.'

'Where's the EMOTION in the line?'

'Kalim, are we even reading the same script?!'

After taking one last sip of his whiskey, Kalim sets his glass down on the counter and takes out his copy of the script. "'Twisted Wonderland' by Yana Toboso, copyright of Disney Japan" the cover reads. Flipping through the cast list, he stops at the names highlighted in bright yellow:

"Kalim Al-Asim ----- Kalim Amin"

What a fucking joke. A guy who lives paycheck to paycheck, barely being able to afford rent, basic groceries, and car payments, being cast in the role of a spoiled rich kid who solves all his problems by throwing money at them? Kalim's not sure whether to laugh or cry.

Hell, he's still half-convinced that he was only cast in this role because he has the same first name as the character, if the other cast members are any indication. (Although, he's also pretty sure some of them are lying, because the jury's still out on what kind of person would name their kid "Riddle")

Kalim's drunken thoughts are interrupted by the sound of the bar's front door opening and two sets of footsteps approaching him. "We knew we'd find you here." Kalim blearily turns towards the voice to see his co-star for Book 4, Jamil, with the protagonist himself, Yuu, standing right behind him.

"Hmph, you guys dunno nothin'." Kalim responds through slightly slurred speech. The two men move to sit down on either side of him. "Well, what I do know is that you've had enough for tonight." Yuu says as he moves Kalim's glass out of his reach for the bartender to collect.

Pouting, Kalim turns his gaze back to the accursed script in front of him. “Still having trouble with your character?” Jamil asks the other man. Kalim sighs deeply as the subject sobers him up enough to come down from the alcohol-induced daze, “Well, that’s one way to put it.” He responds with a mix of frustration and resignation.

“The director really laid into him about it during today’s shoot. Hell, I’d need a drink too if I was raked over the coals like that in front of everyone.” Yuu reasons as he recalls the day’s events with a shiver.

“I just...don't get it!” Kalim slams his fist down on the script, “She keeps having me adjust how I play him like there’s SO much depth to his character when he’s literally just a spoiled rich kid!” The two other men exchange glances before Jamil speaks up.

“Ok. Kalim, I can sympathize with what you’re going through to an extent, but that right there is exactly what the director’s talking about.” He says bluntly.

“Oh God. Not you guys too.” Kalim responds, his shoulders slumping in exasperation before Yuu places a hand on one. “Listen, I’m going to ask you something and I need you to answer honestly.” He prefaces in a gentle but firm tone, “How much of your portion of the script have you read?”

Kalim contemplates the question before answering, “Well...I obviously make sure to read ahead whenever we’ll be working on a scene I’m in...”

“And how far into filming are we?” Jamil chimes in.

“We...uh...just started filming our Book?” He says while gesturing to himself and his co-star.

“And you haven’t filmed any of your side stories yet?” Yuu continues the line of questioning.

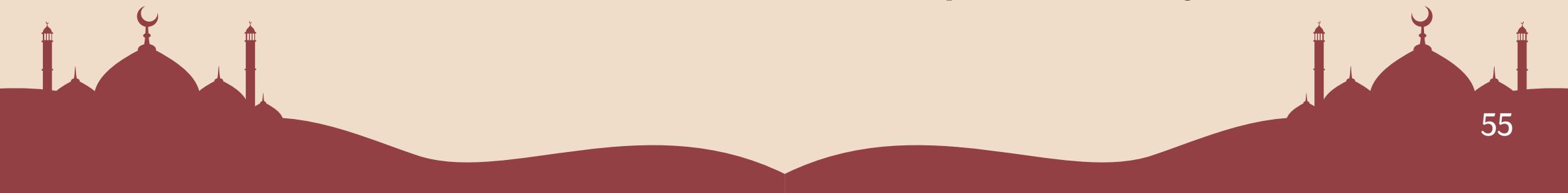
“Well, no– Why’re you guys asking me this?” Kalim asks confusedly.

“Just confirming something.” Jamil answers before continuing, “So you haven’t read any of your character’s scenes after the start of Book 4?”

“No???” Kalim responds, his confusion being slowly joined by irritation at the barrage of questions.

“So you HAVEN’T read any of the parts where he casually mentions the amount of attempts on his life he’s experienced?” Yuu asks, his tone more blunt.

“I– He what???” Kalim stammers before quickly flipping through the script to find what he’s talking about.



“Or the fact that he hates curry because my character, his best friend since childhood, ate some poisoned curry meant for him and almost died?” Jamil asks, his tone getting more harsh.

“U-uh...” Kalim starts sweating as he continues skimming over his lines he's highlighted, but hasn't actually read yet until Yuu slams his palm down on the papers and firmly pulls them away.

“Forget the script for now. I just have one last question for you.” The man says in a serious tone.

“Y-yeah?” Kalim asks, very afraid.

“What would you do if you had all the money and resources that would set you for life and then some, but you're constantly in danger of being assassinated because of it?” Yuu asks outright.

Kalim thinks for a few seconds, “...Well, I'd probably make sure that my family's taken care of.”

“And then?” Jamil adds.

Kalim thinks for a few more seconds, “Move into a really nice house??”

“And THEN?” The two other men urge in unison.

Kalim feels irritated again as he starts blurting out the first answer that comes to mind just to get the other two to lay off, “Well, if my life's ALWAYS on the line, then I guess I'd just throw parties as often as I could, at that point– Wait...huh?” He says in realization.

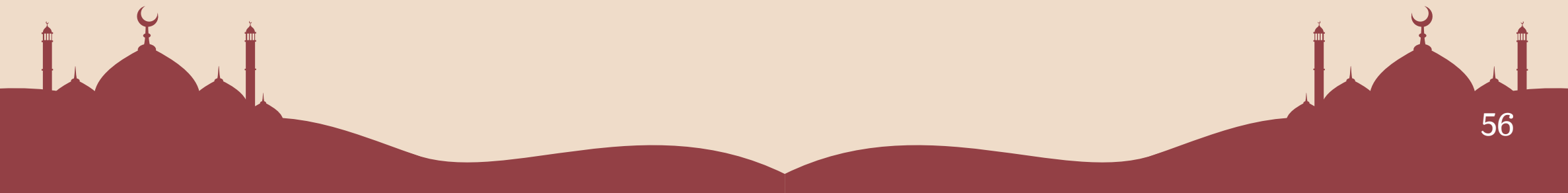
“Sounds familiar, doesn't it?” Yuu says knowingly.

“He...knows that he could be killed at any time because of his inheritance, so he's living each day to the fullest so he'll at least die happy???” Kalim interprets.

Jamil rubs his chin thoughtfully, “Not a bad interpretation, based on what you've read. That'll be a good starting point until you can read the rest of your lines.” He muses while reaching over and moving the other man's script back into his hands, “I'd recommend getting at least to the end of our Book by the next shoot.”

Kalim recoils in horror, “WH– But that's–” His attempt at a rebuttal is cut off by Yuu.

“The foundation of good acting is thoroughly getting to know your character.” He instructs, “The director knows you have potential, so if you can't even do that much, then her verbal criticisms will be the least of your problems.”



“UUUGGGHHH, fine.” Kalim relents as he stands up, stumbling because of the alcohol still in his system and being caught by Jamil.

“Whoa, okay. Let’s get you back to your apartment for now and you can start reading tomorrow.” He offers while already fishing Kalim’s keys out of his pocket.

“Oh, wait! I still need to pay for–” Kalim protests while trying to get his wallet so he can pay for his drinks, only for Yuu to cut him off again.

“I’ll take care of it.” The other man says while taking out his debit card, “You just focus on getting some rest tonight, okay?”

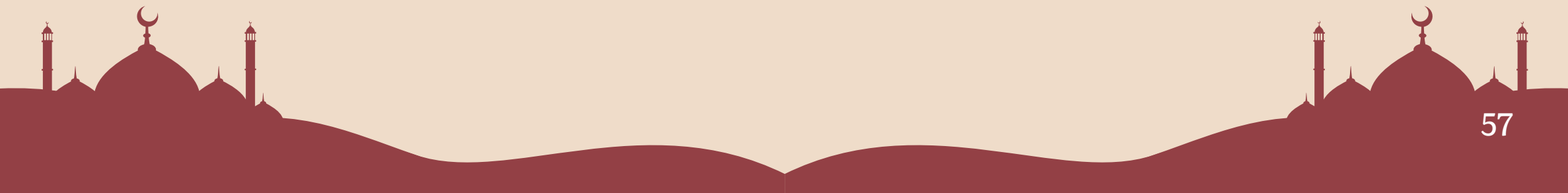
Kalim can barely stammer out a “T-thank you!” before being dragged out of the bar and into the passenger seat of his car by Jamil.

The rhythm of the street lights passing by as Jamil drives him home lulls him to slumber with the last thing he sees before closing his eyes being a billboard advertising the very film series he’s in, which, with the encouragement of his peers, is starting to look just a bit less menacing.

Several days later, at the next shoot for Book 4, Kalim enters the view of the camera, trying desperately not to crumble under the weight of the director’s calculating gaze, and begins reciting his lines, albeit with some shakiness at the start, but then he looks past the director and sees Yuu and Jamil giving him looks of encouragement and he feels the anxiety ease up enough to deliver his lines much more smoothly.

The two other men were really spot-on with their advice; Reading through the entirety of Book 4 beforehand really helped Kalim Amin get a much better grasp of Kalim Al-Asim, which he can tell from the director’s expression being more thoughtful and less frustrated this time around. Once the first scene is finished, the director addresses Kalim after being mostly silent, “Kalim, whatever you did between the last shoot and this one, keep doing it. This Kalim is already leagues better than the old one.” She compliments, leaving him in a mild daze as the crew sets up for the next scene.

He...he’s doing it! He’s actually doing it!! Bubbling with excitement, Kalim practically jumps for joy as he goes behind the cameras to let Yuu and Jamil take their places, but not before both of them can offer him a high five for the improvement. Things are finally looking up!



Months later, there Kalim sits, in his (Bargain bin) suit and bowtie, at the screening party for Book 4 of Twisted Wonderland. He wasn't sure where to sit, initially, as he definitely isn't rich or famous enough to casually plop himself next to half of these guys, but seeing Yuu and Jamil wave him over to their table made his heart fill with warmth as he sat down with them.

Kalim looks around at the other tables, seeing many of his peers indulging themselves in the complimentary champagne, 'Mom and dad DID say they could pick me up just this once if I decided to drink...' He contemplates to himself, but the sound of metal tapping against glass at the front of the room draws his attention before he can make a decision. The director lowers her spoon from her glass as she addresses the whole room, "As per usual at this point, I'd like to thank all of you for making it to the screening party. The fact that we've come this far already is truly an incredible feat in itself and I look forward to working with all of you on the Books to come!"

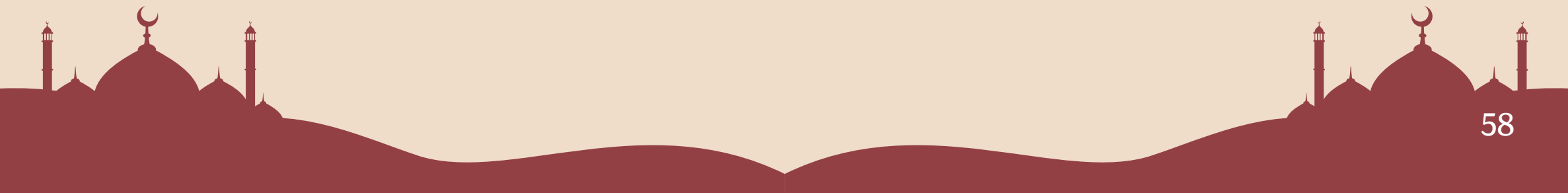
The room fills with applause and cheers at that statement before quieting down as she keeps speaking, "However, before we get on with the viewing, I'd like to give a special shoutout to our very own Kalim Amin for how much he's improved since we started filming!"

Kalim nearly chokes as all eyes turn to him, following the director's shoutout.

"Kalim, I could tell that we both had our doubts at the start, but you stuck through it, you learned, you've grown and have truly become a sight to behold on camera. It was a wonder to see and I greatly look forward to seeing how you'll grow from here on out, not just as part of this cast, but in your future as an actor, which I know for a fact will be bright!" Kalim struggles to process the director's genuine praise as the previous cheers and applause turn to him this time, "And now, without further ado, let's see Kalim and everyone else's great talent in action in 'Twisted Wonderland Book 4: Schemer of the Scalding Sands!'"

The applause dies down as the lights dim and the title card for the film is projected on the screen and the director takes her seat. Finally, with no eyes on him, the weight of the director's words finally hits Kalim, causing his chest to swell with pride and hope for the future.

As the film begins to play, Kalim looks at his reflection in the champagne glass in front of him, his first genuine smile in quite some time looking back at him, and thinks, 'At this point, I think mom and dad would yell at me if I DIDN'T let loose!' while bringing the glass to his lips.





Hestia

STUDENT SPOTLIGHT

Life at NRC: An Inside Look with
Scarabia's Housewarden and Vice
Housewarden with Mar!

Coconut Chai - Serves 4-6 people

Ingredients:

- 1 ¼ cups coconut water
- 5 scoops chai tea
- 5 cups milk (or nut milk of choice)
- 4-5 teaspoons of honey
- Coconut flakes
- Cinnamon to taste

Instructions

- Carefully bring coconut water to boil.
- Add the tea and let it steep for around 5 minutes. If you want the flavor of the chai to be deeper, allow it to steep for longer.
- In the meantime, slowly heat the cups of milk, making sure they don't boil. Use medium-low heat on the stovetop. Stir occasionally to prevent a skin from forming on top, and watch for small bubbles around the edges.
- Make sure the milk is at the appropriate temperature, around 140–150°F (or, 60–65°C). Then, add honey and cinnamon according to taste.

- Once the chai has steeped for long enough, combine your milk and tea mixes. Finish by sprinkling with coconut flakes, and some additional cinnamon.
- For an extra kick to the flavor, you can add a pinch of cardamom, clove, or ginger. You can even add black pepper to heighten the chai's natural heat.

Chicken Curry (Serves 4-6 People)

Ingredients:

- 5 chicken breasts (depending on portion size, about 1.5–2 lbs total)
- 1 large onion, finely chopped
- 4-6 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 ½ tbsp fresh ginger, grated

Spices & Seasoning:

- 2-3 tbsp mild curry powder
- 1 tsp ground coriander
- 1 tsp ground cumin
- 1 tsp paprika
- ½ tsp cinnamon
- Salt and black pepper to taste

For the Sauce:

- 3 tbsp tomato puree (paste)
- 1 (28 oz) can tinned tomatoes (or 2 smaller 14 oz cans)
- 2 cups chicken stock
- 1 cup coconut milk

To Finish:

- 2-3 cups baby spinach

Instructions:

- Cut the chicken breasts into bite-sized pieces.
- Sauté the aromatics:
 - Heat 2 tbsp oil in a large pan over medium heat.
 - Add the onion and sauté for 3-5 minutes until softened.
 - Stir in the garlic and ginger; cook for another 1 minute.
- Toast the spices:
 - Add curry powder, coriander, cumin, paprika, cinnamon, salt, and pepper.
 - Stir well for 30 seconds until fragrant.
- Add the chicken pieces and cook until lightly browned, about 5 minutes.
- Make the sauce:
 - Stir in tomato puree, tinned tomatoes, and chicken stock.
 - Bring to a gentle simmer and cook for 15 minutes, stirring occasionally.
- Pour in coconut milk and mix well.
- Add baby spinach and let it wilt into the curry. Simmer for another 5 minutes.
- Taste & adjust. Check seasoning and adjust if needed.
- Serve hot over rice, naan, or with your preferred side.



Gala Troubles and The Undermining Stress of The Heir

| Kouro

| A/N: This is a personality swap AU. Jamil has Vil's personality and Kalim has Epel's.

In the halls of the Asim household in the Scalding Sands, a tall figure walked down the hallway, with their hair in a low ponytail with multiple braids, with some on the sides of the head. They were braided with elegance expected of a Viper servant in the household. The light slowly came to the uniquely shaped open windows and shone on their face.

Jamil Viper. The prized servant of the house. The example of an extraordinary servant that all Vipers should always strive for. Jamil Viper had modest makeup on his face, and it looked like he was always in a state of calmness despite the hardships he endures daily with Kalim Al-Asim—a volcano of defiance in an heir.

“Lord Al-Asim, please don’t run off into the market again without me,” Jamil sighed as he got the rubbing alcohol, putting it where the cut bored at, Kalim’s cheek. The heir winced as his servant put it on his cheek.

“I do what I want,” Kalim muttered as the servant looked disappointed, “And I am fine!”

“You got into a fight with a vendor! How is that fine?!” Jamil sighed heavily before putting on the bandaid.

That night, Jamil came to Kalim’s room, holding the neatly folded current fittings for the attire. It was for a royal gala with business partners and potential suitors for the oldest Al-Asim of the house. Kalim was not doing anything that he was told by his father, ‘Practice his courting’ and ‘Fix his behavior for suitors’.

“Why aren’t you practicing? You won’t be able to get any suitors at this rate,” Jamil mentioned as the heir looked away in defiance, trying to avoid the gaze in the mirror at his bandaged cheek. He looked hurt but quickly hid his expression with a mask of perfected rebellion.

Everything was planned from Kalim's birth: the arranged marriage and the training to be the ideal husband and heir. Jamil noticed their sad expression before they masked it again. “Are you okay?” the servant asked Kalim sternly and with a touch of care. He looked away with a pained expression before settling with a sigh.

“I don’t think I’m cut out to be the heir, I want to be free,” Kalim said slowly with a strain of sadness. The servant frowned and tried to reassure the heir. Jamil knew that Kalim was under mountains of pressure from just being born in the Al-Asim household.



“Don’t be ridiculous, you are fit to be heir,” Jamil paused, considering his next words carefully, “You just don’t know it yet.” The servant cracked a rare smile on his stern face. “Trust me.” Those were Jamil’s last words before leaving to let Kalim change into his royal gala attire for the night.

Meanwhile, the party was bustling with activity in the Al-Asim main lounge area. The business partners were talking with the parents as the suitors waited with bated breath for the heir to come and charm them. Music was playing in the background, making the atmosphere lively as much as possible.

The suitors were the daughters of the business partners and some were from other royal families that were invited alongside them. Jamil came into the area with a tray of party favors and donned a more formal version of the servant uniform, now having accents of gold linings and hints of blue. He saw Kalim stumbled in, wearing the royal attire given and made by the family tailor, looking a little nervous but holding their head up high and walking into the gala his father had hosted.

“My son, go talk with your future suitors,” His father said, gripping on Kalim’s shoulder, before making it tighter, “I will not have my son be single. As the heir, you have to marry. Father orders.”

The heir looked down, scared of his father. He couldn’t disobey his father but in his heart he knew that he has free will to do what he wanted without asking anyone.

Jamil was handing out cocktails when he noticed his master’s discomfort. He walked up to Kalim’s father with an expression of concern for Kalim and disdain for their father. “Lord Al-Asim, you are hurting your child,” Jamil said sternly as Kalim’s father let go and huffed in annoyance.

After the party, Kalim was in his room. They are leaning on the wall, looking miserable. He sighed and closed his eyes a few times before hearing a knock at his door.

“Who is it?” Kalim mumbled glumly.

“My lord, it’s Jamil Viper. Your personal servant,” Jamil said, placid.

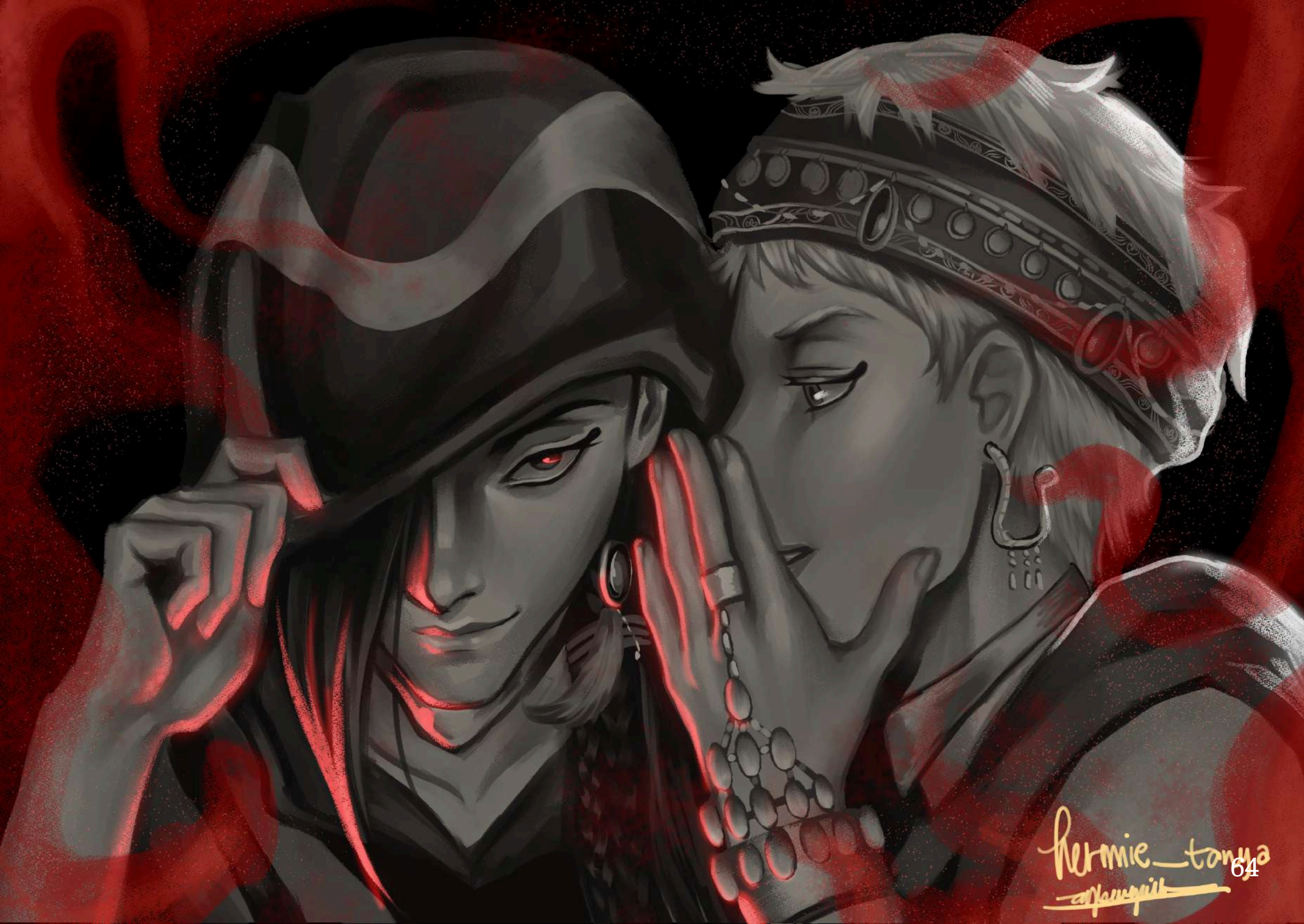
“Come in,” Kalim said, strained. The door creaked open and revealed Jamil, now with no makeup and in his robe.

“What is wrong, my lord?” Jamil said, worried.

“I’m fine!” Kalim snapped, tears streaming down their face.

The night ended with Jamil reassuring Kalim, who broke from the stress from being an heir to the Asim household.





hermie_tanya
artemurik

All Handled

| Shoopy

| CW: Angst

Knock. Knock. Knock.

A ray of light shone in the boy's ruby eyes. He raised a hand to offer a bit of shade after rapping on the ornate doors, glancing up at the beautiful blue sky above with a familiar, ever-present smile on his face. The excitement alone was evident through the gleam in his bright, red eyes. And yet... ..It was odd, usually they-

With a shift and interrupting creak, the tall doors swung open before Kalim, revealing an extensive mansion. With columns extending to the high ceilings, and rays of the Scalding Sand's ever so vibrant sun shining through elegantly placed windows onto the highest quality furniture one could imagine. To Kalim, it was just one word: Home!

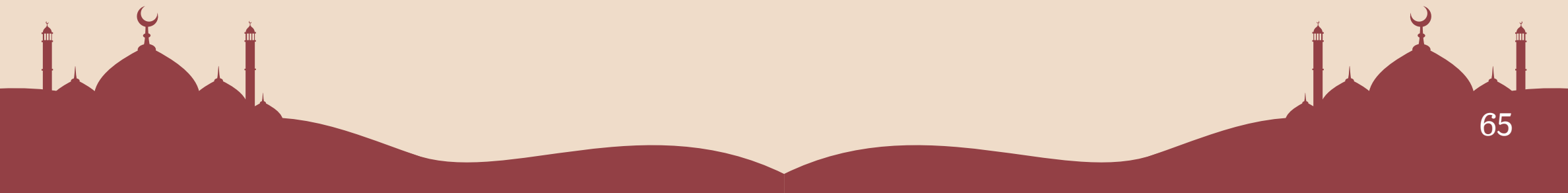
And, usually, one of the many workers would have been there to greet him. The Asim estate had always been a bustling place, given the amount of siblings he had alone: not to mention all the servants who worked under his father.

As odd as the lack of people in the main lounge area was, he didn't blame anyone! In fact, he didn't mind! It was Al'ab Nariya after all. Yasamina River Fireworks Fest was a busy time, but it got him so hyped! He loved seeing the fireworks every year with his siblings and Jamil. Now that his family was in charge of it, he could only imagine what it'd be like.

Despite currently being alone in the expansive space, he couldn't help but happily bounce on his heels. The sight of home filled him with such a familiar warmth. He could barely wait.

So he didn't!

The boy swung himself around one of the many pillars with a boisterous laugh, sending himself running forward towards one of the many long halls. His heart thumped with fast-paced excitement. Adrenaline bubbled through the Asim's heir's veins. Kalim took in all the sights and sounds: The clicks of his sandals with every step, the slight breeze rustling the trees in the courtyard, the many rooms the hallway branched off too. Oh! He should play mancala with some of the littlest siblings there! And, ah- he danced there with Jamil last time they visited! Nearly got poisoned in that room, but that wasn't really something he had to worry about right now, was it? No, today was different!



Because today, he would help everyone with the festival. They would all watch it together. He would get everything set up with everyone and meet back up with Jamil. He'd been looking forward to this for months now, ever since he'd begun training for the SDC. He'd been looking forward to this one, single, chance.

A chance to prove that he could do it alone or, at least, without his companion.

He knew he had the occasional bad habit expecting others to do things without confirming beforehand... or remembering what was needed for big gatherings in general- BUT this time would be different. He swore it to himself, and he swore it to Jamil. Because if he could do this now, then Jamil would have some of the freedom he desired. Even just a small piece of it. If Jamil saw what Kalim could do, he could either hopefully understand that Kalim was trying his best to look out for his friend, or to give himself space. Because as much as he desired Jamil's friendship, Kalim cared enough to understand that it may not be what he wanted. He respected that.

He felt his chest tighten. His smile faltered, but only for a moment.

"Kalim!" A familiar, comforting voice called out to him. The boy skid to a halt.

His eyes widened, and he had to momentarily backtrack through the long hall, pausing between an opening of two large pillars leading to a yard filled to the brim with family and friends.

His beaming grin quickly strengthened once again. "Mah!" He called out in return, rushing forward to wrap the woman up in a warm, welcoming hug, which she gave back just as kindly.

"Welcome home!" She greeted with a smile that made it obvious where he got his from, "Where's Jamil? Are you feeling alright? Not injured, yes? Everything went smoothly during your travels?" She rambled after making sure he wasn't injured at least three times, scanning him from head to toe as she carried a basket of decor.

"No, mah, I'm fine! I just ended up bringing some friends from school, so I let Jamil stay to show them around! I can handle whatever you need."

There was a small beat.

"Oh!" She exclaimed after a brief pause, blinking at him in disbelief, "Oh, no dear. You don't have to do any of that."

"But-"

"Ah ah! No buts! I'm sure you'd much rather be with your friends or siblings- I know how much you care for them. Besides, we have everything covered."



As nice as the words felt to hear, it didn't take much to see that they didn't actually have everything covered. As though mother Asim sensed this realization, she gently nudged Kalim away, "Go on! I'm sure they'd love to see you." He felt... Well, honestly, he wasn't sure what he felt, but he knew mom meant well.

"Alright! I'll be back!" He answered in an attempt to continue to sound upbeat. Because he was! He could still ask anyone else in the family if they needed anything! Anything at all. His mother waved him off as he bounded away, this time a little slower.

"Asad! Do you need anything?" He chirped.

"Oh! Um... No! Not right now!" He got in reply.

"Can I help?" Kalim asked.

"No, I got it. Thanks!" They responded.

"How about-" He tried-

"No, I'm good." They said,

"Well it's already starting to get late-" They excused,

"O-Oh! Um- I think Jamil knows more about this sort of thing, sorry," They stuttered,

"Don't worry, it's already finished!" They reassured,

It's already finished.

It was night. All that was left to do was meet up with his friends and he'd-

He'd done nothing.

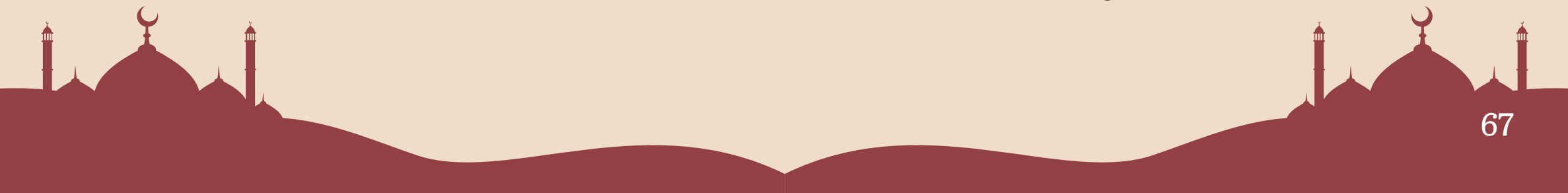
Nothing at all.

He didn't even have the opportunity to.

Something stirred in his chest. He didn't know how to name it- but he caught a glimpse of his reflection in the water flowing through their garden: one of the many spots he came to in order to try and find work. This time it was empty. There was no smile on his face. It didn't look right or feel right and- it was too quiet outside. The sky was so empty with all but fading stars as the many lights in the streets drowned them out. He had to go back to Jamil now. He didn't really feel excited- he didn't really complete what he set out to do... but it wasn't supposed to be that big of a deal, right?

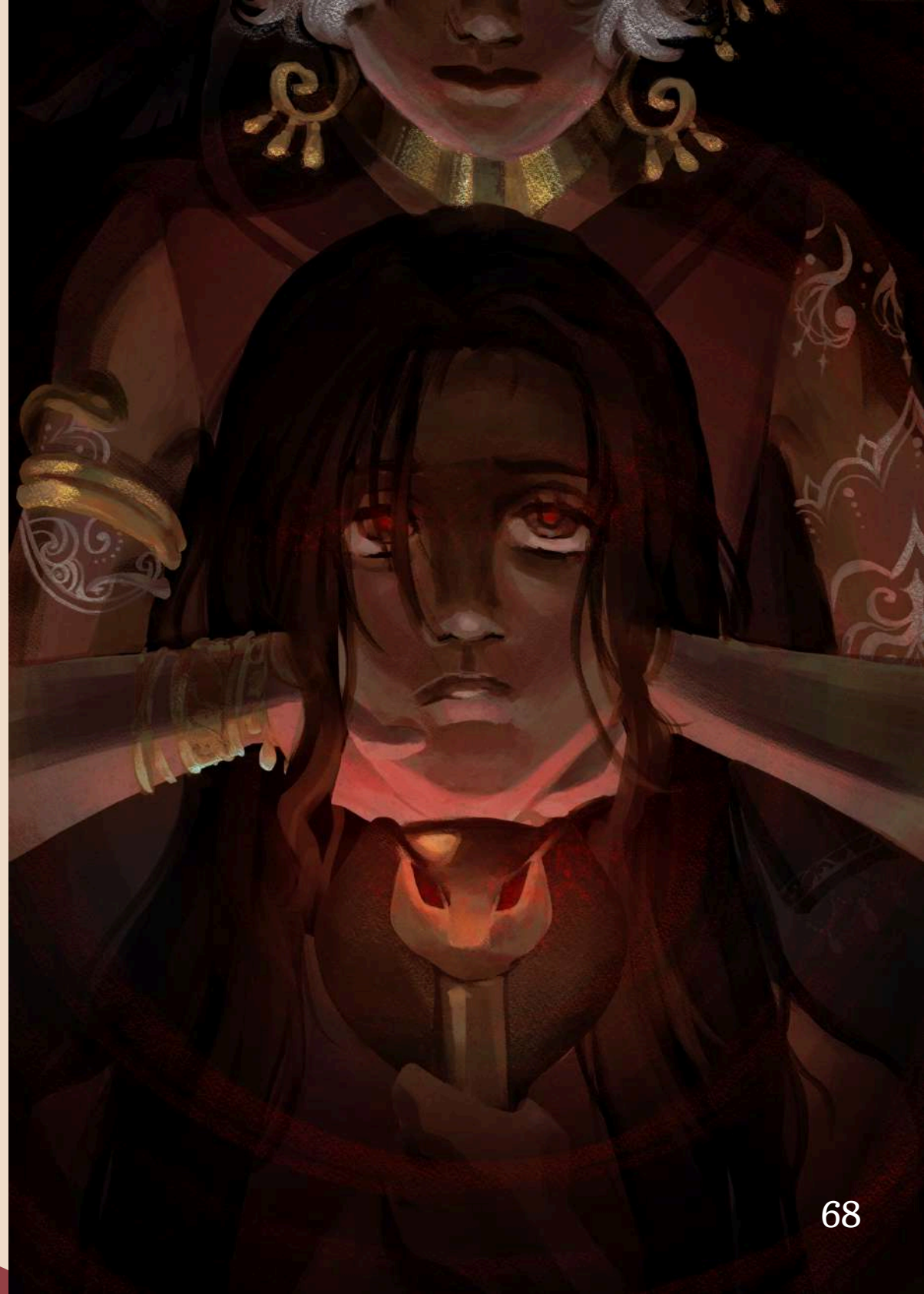
Right? So he just had to pick himself back up, go out there, have fun, then try again later!

If he has the chance ...Right?



Kalim pushed himself away from the fountain, setting out for the estate's exit. He just had to wear a smile on his face and enjoy himself.

That's what they wanted him to do.





FACE
OF WANDS



THE HIGH PRIESTESS

Lend a Hand

| Rain

Ataraxia (n) - a state of freedom from emotional disturbance and anxiety; tranquility

It was obvious for the red-haired teen that something was wrong with his upperclassman. The distant gaze, how his braid would have some loose strands, how he seemed more slouched than ever - even though he was still good to hide. It wasn't obvious for anyone else, but Ace, the always perceptive card soldier, could notice it. And it worried him.

Jamil sighed again. He could feel Ace's gaze on him, noticing how the freshman was constantly worried whenever he failed a pass or just didn't say anything. He could feel it and it frustrated him. He tried so hard to hide it, and somehow, the heart soldier was the one who noticed right through him.

He kept staring at the foreign ceiling, staying at a hotel with his basketball teammates in another island for a game. On the bed beside him, was the red-haired teenager, his roommate for the night, snoring softly and deep in his sleep in a position, only the sevens knew how he could feel comfortable. Sighing again, the vice-housewarden turned his back to the other boy, closing his eyes as he forced himself into slumber.

There he was again. That same table. That familiar spoon tightly in his hold. He looked down at his food, noticing the sight of curry. Even though it was still his favorite food, this specific curry was more than it. The moment he swallowed the food, he could feel it.

J-Jamil!"

The same burning sensation in his mouth, the taste of blood. The way his throat seemed to completely close as he let go of the spoon, putting his small hands around his neck, as if trying to pry it open. He could hear, the distant screams and yells. How desperate everyone seemed to be around him.

Principally his closest friend, that was now crying in confusion and fear. He tried to stand up, but his legs didn't move, making him only fall backwards. He couldn't breathe. Warm hands rested on his shoulders, trying to hold him up, before he was carried away in a frenzy, his friend still following.

"Jamil!" There was nothing it could be done. He couldn't move. He couldn't breath. He was only crying, feeling nothing, but despair.

"JAMIL!"

A voice sudden yelled, making the brunette snap out of his dream, quickly sitting up - which proved to be a mistake as he had hit the other's boys forehead. Ace, who was holding Jamil's shoulders, flinched away, holding a hand over head as he whined lowly. Jamil stared at the soldier for a bit, before he took notice of his state. Hands clenching on his sheets, body shaking like a leaf, sweat covering all of him, and tears, he could feel the tears going down his cheeks. Trying to recover his breath, Jamil moved a hand up to his face, cleaning his tears.

After complaining lowly at himself, Ace stared at Jamil in silence, while still caressing his forehead. Some quiet minutes passed between the two teenagers before the red-haired boy took a deep breath, looking down at the bed-sheets. His voice was gentle, even soothing as he muttered, "Still better than waking up to Deuce's snores." Jamil stared at him blankly, slowly processing his words. Ace was trying to comfort him, by making a joke. The Scarabia student let out a huff, almost in disbelief at the situation, but he couldn't help but be thankful.

"That's because you don't hear Kalim sleep talking." He played along, frowning a bit at how hoarse his voice sounded. Taking notice of it, Ace quickly picked up a water bottle that was resting on his bedside table before offering to Jamil, who nodded thankfully, taking large gulps of the drink. They stayed quiet for a little more, before the Heartslabyul student sighed again, this time sitting in front of Jamil with his legs crossed. "Are these nightmares a common occurrence?" He murmured gently.

"It wasn't a nightmare." At that, the freshman lifted an eyebrow, looking even more confused before groaning a bit.

"Look, I know I'm not the best person you'd want to talk about your emotions and... Stuff." He started, fidgeting with the sleeve of his hoodie. "But I can tell when someone is having a nightmare, I-"

"It wasn't a nightmare. It was a memory." Jamil confessed, frowning at his own words as he looks down at his hands. Ace quickly shut his mouth, staring at the older teen in front of him. Those words made Ace even more confused, but principally worried. Had awoken by Jamil's soft cries and gasps, as if the boy was trying to breath but couldn't, he was certain it was just a nightmare.

"Do-... Do you wanna talk about it?" He hesitated, knowing it was certainly a sensitive topic. The vice-housewarden kept looking down at his lap before sighing again, closing his eyes in focus. He couldn't believe he was about to entrust his darkest memory to a freshman from another dorm, it was nearly humorous. But he could see, he noticed genuine worry in his tone and actions. Taking a deep breath, Jamil nodded, letting out any emotions he was holding at the moment.

The words somehow felt heavy, as if he unconsciously were still trying to hold them back. After finally let go, the brunette took another deep breath, this time feeling more relieved somehow. His head now resting on the wall behind him. "Woah... That... That sucks." Ace stated, awkwardly. Jamil slowly moved his head to stare directly at the boy, completely baffled. "Okay, yeah, I know that was the wrong thing to say-" The soldier tried to correct himself, biting his lower lip nervously as he recollected his thoughts. "What I meant was, no kid should go through that, even if you're a servant or somethin'."

They both stayed in silence after it, this time was more comforting, practically calming the two. Jamil yawned softly, letting out a soft chuckle. "You're terrible at comforting people." Ace huffed, glaring at him, ready to retorted before he noticed how relaxed Jamil looked, deciding to let this one slide, only this time. Another yawn followed, this time from the red haired, as he stood up from the bed, walking towards his own. "Thanks." The Scarabia student added, moving a hand up. The heart soldier stared at him then at his hand before fist-bumping him gently. "Always." He reminded, jumping back at his bed.

The rest of the night was tranquil. With the only sound in the room being both of their breathing, almost harmonizing.



To Glow like the Stars

| Vione Hobbes

“Could you teach me this... “glowing”?”

“HUH?! What kinda third act twist...?!” Idia stares at Jamil with an incredulous look, his eyes wide and mouth agape. Letting out a small sigh, the Scarabia student realizes that it'll be a bit more difficult than he first thought to convince the reclusive Housewarden to teach him. Brushing some of his hair from his face, Jamil hums to himself as he ponders on how to continue the conversation. After a moment, an idea comes to mind - it might work, but it'll take a little more effort than he originally anticipated.

“You're obviously a veteran fan, and I apologize for not knowing the band as well as you. I only just recently discovered them. I just haven't been sure on where to begin or how to fully become a proper fan. It's a bit daunting, but I'm truly interested. And since you know more, who else could I possibly ask...?” Idia's expression eases a bit, becoming more contemplative but unsure as he folds his arms across his chest.

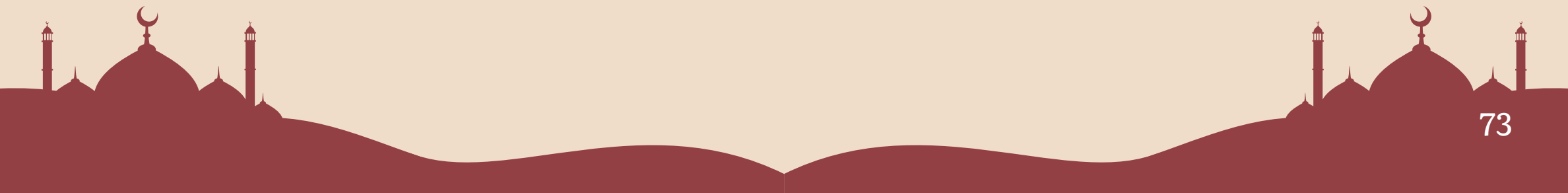
“...w-well, you...have a point. And getting more people into Premo would be cool, I suppose...” A huff leaves him as he rubs at his slightly reddened face, his yellow eyes darting to and fro as he weighs the options. “B-but at the same time, how do I know you wouldn't mock me if I taught you, huh? How would I know you wouldn't tell others about it...?”

“Idia, sir, do you truly think of me as the type of guy to do that kind of thing?”

“...Not really, I guess. Um, are you...s-sure you wanna learn how to glow? I mean, it's kinda intense for rookie Threads - that's the name of us fans.” Nodding at Idia's words, Jamil flashes him a small smile.

“I'm sure of it. After all, you're the only other person I know that's interested in them. And from what I saw, you're quite skilled at it,” he replies, noting the glimmer of excitement in the taller male's eyes and the grin spreading across his face as his fiery hair seems to flicker more lively.

“Well, I have been into Premo for a couple years now - since their debut, actually. So if anyone's an expert, it'd be me. So, you know what...? Sure, I'll teach you - but don't expect me to go easy mode on you.”



“That's more than fine by me. I'll follow your lead.” With a nod, Idia suddenly shoves the lightsticks he's holding towards Jamil, the bright neon light illuminating the night around them. Reaching into the pockets of his hoodie, he withdraws two more LED lightsticks and activates them.

“First, you're gonna need these. Lightsticks are what make the glowing all the more special - especially in live venues. Thankfully, I brought a spare pair in case those ones stopped working.”

Turning back to the tablet he has propped up on one of the benches in the courtyard, Idia motions for Jamil to come closer. Moving over so that he's standing next to his elder, Jamil watches as a trio of women on stage speak with each other and to the crowd, with the audience cheering audibly. After a minute or so, the performers get into place, and the track for their next performance begins. Idia's grin only seems to grow wider, his dagger sharp teeth shining in the light illuminating his face.

“Looks like they're about to start...is there a specific routine for this song?” Jamil asks, glancing at Idia.

“Yeah - but with glowing, you technically can do whatever just feels right. But, Premo has made a playlist with what to do for each specific song if you're coming IRL. Can't do all of this in a live show, but it's easier at home. Now, step back and watch how it's done,” Idia responds, rolling his shoulders before lightly tapping the sticks together in time with the music. Planting his feet shoulder width apart, he begins to move his arms and upper body - swinging his arms in arcs and thrusting his hands in varying angles. The way he moves is similar to that of a well-practiced choreographed dance, and Jamil begins to wonder if maybe this was a good idea. Sure, Idia knows the moves and Jamil is sure he can recreate them, but it's not as impressive upon closer inspection.

“...Is that all-”

“Hush. This is the main part.” As the chorus kicks in and the song becomes more intense, Idia's moves suddenly become much more dramatic and bold, easily moving in time with the quick beat.

The light of the glowsticks trail after his hands with each thrust and swing of his arms, his reach going from down by his legs to above his head as he continues. Jamil's eyes widen as he watches, memorizing the dance and every move as best as he can...and yet, despite it being simpler than the dances he's done before, there's something about Idia's performance that's keeping his attention.



“Alright, I think I got it. Mind if I join you for this next part?” Idia simply nods, too enraptured with the performance on screen to properly respond. With a nod as well, Jamil begins to replicate the moves that his elder had done from the beginning of the song, the two dancing in time with the music. While Idia is more wide and loose, Jamil’s movements feel almost stiff, and Idia abruptly stops during the verse, scowling at him.

“Jamil, if you're going to glow, you can't just move like that...!” Coming to a halt, Jamil casts an unamused look at Idia.

“Like what? I'm doing the moves exactly how you did them.”

“Yeah, but you look stiff - like an improperly rigged 3D model. You’re lacking the passion of proper glowing!” Jamil pauses at that, blinking as he processes his words.

“...passion?”

“Well, yeah! I literally just said that - undeafen yourself, jeez...” Letting out a sigh, Idia brushes some of his flickering bangs from his face as he continues to speak.

“Passion for the group - for the music, it's the most important part of glowing. The dance is a way to simply express that passion in a visible way. The band can't see everyone in the venue while they perform...but they can see the lightsticks. And seeing everyone visibly showing their enjoyment of their music gives them reason to perform more energetically. It's like we're powering up their Spirit Bomb. You understand what I'm saying?”

Passion...it all finally made sense to Jamil, on why Idia's dance was so captivating and why he wasn't entirely able to capture the same energy.

“That...I never actually considered being passionate during my dances. I simply focused on the routine and making sure I was on top of the choreography...but that makes a lot of sense. Thank you, Idia - truly, you've helped me a lot.” Giving a nod, Idia turns back to the screen and, realizing that the bridge of the song is about to cut into the chorus, he gives the shorter male a grin.

“Chorus is coming up. Now, put some passion into your moves...!! Glow like you mean it!”

“Of course, Idia.” The two redirect their attention to the video feed and music blaring from the speakers, before they begin to dance once more. Allowing himself to fully listen to the music and enjoy himself, Jamil's moves become more loose and open, giving a more dramatic and passionate performance.



Their movements are near identical - brimming with energy and joy as they move their arms and upper body in sync. As the song inevitably draws to an end, Idia lets out a heavy sigh as he pulls a bottle of water out from his jacket pocket and takes a sip, his cheeks flushed from exerting himself. "I think I finally got it...I've been recently training for the Fairy Gala, and I was told that my dance was lackluster. But because of you, Idia, I think I know what I must do to make sure I'm able to properly perform. Thank you again," Jamil says, a soft smile on his face.

"O-oh, um, yeah. Sure." Idia gives a small nod, returning his water to his pocket. Hesitating, his gaze flicks between the livestream to Jamil, before he timidly speaks once more. "...you wanna stay for another song? I-if not, I get it -"

"Sure. I'm...actually enjoying this." Perking up at Jamil's response, Idia quickly nods as the next song begins to start. "I'll follow your lead."

"Watch and learn, Jamil... tonight, we're gonna glow like the stars!! Actually, uh, just ignore that last part..."

"...Let's glow like the stars, Idia."



The Lie

| Audrey

Jamil collapsed like a puppet with its strings cut not long after they got him back from his overblot.

Kalim nearly had a heart attack at the sight until Azul claimed it was normal.

All of his remaining energy had been expended on his rage-filled tirade, leaving him with absolutely nothing left to stay conscious.

Even though his words had been cruel and laced with anger, Kalim felt an overwhelming sense of worry wash over him.

He may not know as much about Jamil's situation as he thought he did, but he knew betrayal did not bode well in the eyes of his family.

Before Jamil descended into madness, he exclaimed that he didn't care about what happened to him or his family anymore. Kalim knew that wasn't true.

Jamil had sacrificed everything to keep his family in good graces with Kalim's family. If Azul and Jade had really live-streamed Jamil's breakdown, then there was no way for either of them to damage control it well enough for it not to reach his parents.

Thankfully, Azul had assured him that it was a rouse to push Jamil toward his own defeat. It was excessively cruel to lie about Jamil being exposed to people who could punish him severely for such a crime, but they didn't know what it was like at home.

If it was contained within their dorm then that was fine...It just meant Kalim could handle the rest on his own.

When Kalim joined Jamil in NRC, he had promised Jamil's parents that he'd keep them updated on how Jamil was doing. Jamil hadn't contacted them as much as he did with Najma. They knew Kalim joining him posed certain risks, and they were just as entitled to know if something were to happen to either of them while they were gone abroad.

Kalim had foolishly thought the worst was behind them. After Jamil got poisoned in his place, he vowed never to eat anything but Jamil's food ever again, and he studied poison obsessively so that there was no way anyone could get hurt.

He never imagined Jamil would hold back so much unspoken resentment, he didn't think he'd lose him to this rare magical anomaly, overblots usually kill people.



He came into Jamil's room to his roommate lounging on his side of the room. He was just as upset as the rest of their dormmates, but him knowing Jamil more than some of the other students made him thankfully a lot more open-minded to his plight. He didn't seem uncomfortable being in the same room as someone who mind-controlled him mere moments before, but then again, it's not like Jamil could do anything in the state he was in right now.

"How is he?" Kalim asks quietly, though keeping his voice low was hardly needed.

"He hasn't moved an inch." Jamil's roommate told him, "Overblotting is serious, isn't it? Shouldn't we be taking him to a doctor?"

"Don't worry, my family's personal doctor is going to see him tomorrow morning around the time you're all getting sent home." Kalim assures him, and Jamil's roommate seemed relieved that reliable and compassionate Kalim was back.

"...Is it alright if I have some privacy with him? I need to make a few more calls." Kalim asks.

As if sensing Kalim's rare bout of seriousness and solemn demeanor, Jamil's roommate quickly agrees, picks up some of his things, and leaves them alone.

Kalim sighed and sat down on the floor beside Jamil's bed.

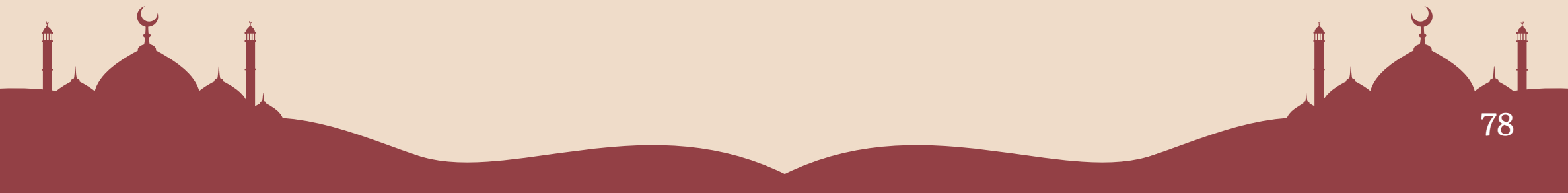
He did call his doctor, a reliable woman who often took care of both of them when they were poisoned as children. He requested he not tell their families what happened...He wanted to do that himself.

Many believed Kalim always wore his heart on his sleeve. That was exactly why he needed time to craft a perfect story that would protect Jamil and his family from any punishment they could face for what truly happened over winter break. He didn't expect people to understand what he and Jamil went through, how could they? Not once in their whole lives were either of them ever truly safe.

Jamil's fears, as much as Kalim tried to ease them, were very real. He had worked so long and hard, breaking himself down so that his family's livelihoods were secure. There was so much pressure riding on his friendship with Kalim...And what kind of friend would Kalim be if he allowed Jamil to take all the blame?

If only Jamil just talked to him. If he had known-

Kalim shook those thoughts out of his head. It wasn't his place to demand Jamil be vulnerable in front of him. Especially not after all the times he went against Jamil's requests and downplayed his anxieties.



He decided Jamil's family deserved to know what happened first.

Jamil's mother had given Kalim her number so that he could call her and let her know if something happened to either of them. She didn't say so, but Kalim was sure she trusted him to tell her if anything happened to Jamil that he wasn't communicating.

He hated being the bearer of bad news, it made his stomach hurt just remembering the way she would clutch Jamil's hand and express her regrets when he was sick. He didn't want to see Jamil or his family in pain like that again. He took a deep breath and dialed her number, she picked up after only one ring.

"Master Kalim?" She greeted. "Hi Mrs. Viper," he says.

"Hello! What a pleasant surprise. Isn't it late for you? Are you and Jamil alright?" She asks, she was always big on asking questions.

"...Jamil overblotted." Kalim admits outright.

There's a pause before she starts to ask him questions more frequently, "Is he okay? Is he alive?!"

"He's okay, I'm with him right now, he's sleeping." Kalim tells her, and he can hear her sigh with relief.

"Great Sevens, what happened?" She questions.

"A lot of things. I think it was mainly stress and overexertion. Jamil was a lot more upset about the exam thing this semester than I previously thought. I thought the training camp would be a good way to learn and bond with the other dorm mates over break, but I didn't see what was happening until it was too late." Kalim told his story, riddled with little lies and half-truths, "But he's alive, I think he's mostly just exhausted now. I'm sending the family doctor down tomorrow to check him out. Depending on what she says, it might be safer for him to recover here instead of home."

"...Master Kalim, thank you for being there for him. Were you unharmed?"

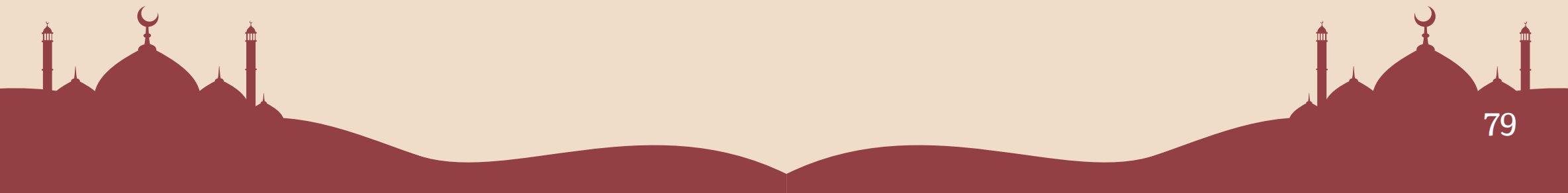
"I'm okay, he didn't hurt me at all." Kalim lied.

"Do your parents know?"

"I haven't told them. Besides Dr. Hadi, you're the only person I've told. I thought you deserved to know first. I also thought it was better if you told Mr. Viper and Najma instead of me or my parents."

"I'll tell them. Please keep in touch and let me know when he's awake." Jamil's mom requested.

"Sure thing, I'll talk to you soon." Kalim says, then hangs up.



Okay, the first hurdle was done. Now, he needs to explain everything to his dad. He stuck to his story around the adults, and when Jamil was awake and more lucid the next morning, he told him the lie he needed to keep up. It wasn't too hard for him, their whole friendship was a lie after all. Jamil was surprised that Kalim didn't tell them the truth, that he didn't let Jamil accept the full blame, and maybe that was Jamil also not knowing who Kalim truly was either.

Because Kalim has lied before and will lie again if it means keeping his friend safe.

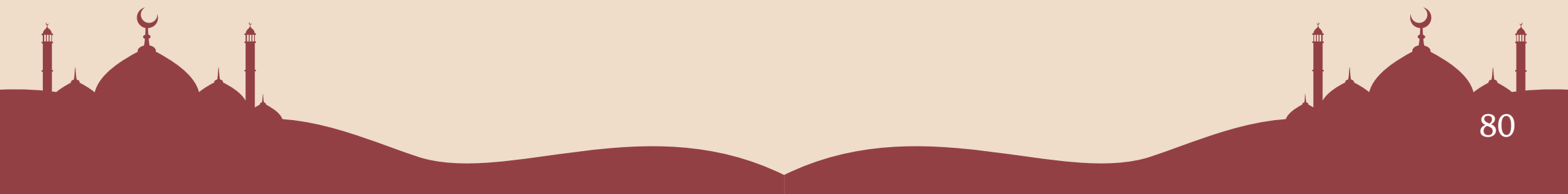
Behind the Scenes

Rain

Kalim had been told hundreds of times. "It's too many animals! Think of the care- The labor! I'd have to run hundreds of risk assessments!" He knew that it took time, to match them across the dorm, to find someone experienced enough in animal linguistics (and diplomatic enough to prevent fighting). And he appreciated every minute of it! How could he not, when the parades made everyone so happy?

The appreciation began to grow when he faced the day in front of him. Wow, there was really this much to do? Jamil's words rang in his ears- 'Maybe you'd get what I meant if you were the one taking care of everything.' At the time it sounded fun! Getting to see behind the scenes at the animal's husbandry had to be an excellent experience. But now, in ill-fitting overalls and listening attentively to the staff member leading him, he began to reflect on his enthusiasm. Only a little, though.

"You seriously do this all by hand?" He queried, a little in awe. The woman leading him chuckled heartily.



“We can’t all clean up with magic. And we can’t have you doing it, either. Not without proper training and experience, anyway.” The employee who he had come to know as Samah had insisted on transporting the majority of the husbandry equipment. She lowered the wheelbarrow of supplies she was carrying outside the enclosure. “Not that I doubt your capabilities. I just can’t risk you getting injured on the job.”

Kalim stepped aside as she unlocked the indoor area of the elephant enclosure, which was surprisingly clean already.

“We already made a start. I’m going to start emptying some more fresh sand across the enclosure.”

Kalim waited awkwardly as she began evening out strategically left patches on the ground, feeling less helpful and more like a child on a field trip. The cheerful conversation the pair were having earlier had since dried up, and the housewarden was left shifting uncomfortably from foot to foot.

“If you’d like, I could–”

“No, no, Master Kalim. Don’t worry about that. I’m more than capable of finishing up the dull part.” Samah responded in a chipper tone, placing the empty bag back in the wheelbarrow.

“I feel bad letting you do everything!” Kalim tried to reason. “Besides, I’m here because I wanted to know how everything goes on behind the scenes. I’m happy to help.” He gave a smile he hoped looked natural. In reality, he felt a mixture of disappointment and frustration.

“If you’re sure, then how about sweeping up the walkway?”

She had barely finished talking when he had grabbed the broom and started tidying.

“You’re eager. That’s a good quality to have.”

“Thank you, I just– I’ve got it, I’ve got it!” He cut himself off quickly when she went to assist him. “I’m almost done, see?” That feeling of frustration was back, though it was never directed at the nice keeper. The annoyance was directed at himself, for taking someone else’s work for granted and for assuming that he would be helpful in this situation, because at the time being he only seemed to be in the way.

“Sorry. Here. Is that okay?” He asked, twisting the broom in his hands anxiously.

“Perfect.”



Kalim continued to wring the handle of the broom. “I’m sorry if I’m taking time out of your schedule for this. I’m sure you’re busy.”

“It’s no bother. I’m more than happy to help.”

“Really, I was hoping to be the one helping you.” He confessed without thinking. “I wanted to get a better understanding of how much work goes into the celebrations I have for my friends. I’m a little worried that I’ve just created more for you.” Kalim tried to keep his tone light, but a touch of disappointment had managed to leech into his words.

“It’s really no trouble. If anything, I’m glad you’ve taken an interest.”

Kalim nodded with a faint smile and a hum.

“Besides, I can certainly picture what trouble could entail.”

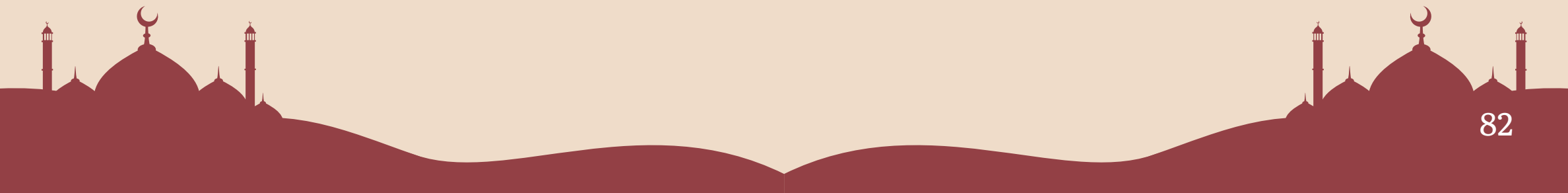
Kalim nodded straight faced and silently.

The young woman beckoned him back out of the enclosure and locked the gate, leading him back down the corridor. “Listen. I know we’re supposed to check out the food prep station next, but in all honesty it’s practically done. How about I see if I can get you in contact with the trainers and event planners instead? They might have something you can apply in your daily life.”

“You’d do that?”

“If that’s more your thing.”

“I’d appreciate that so much! Thank you, seriously. For letting me lend a hand.”





Choices

| Soru

would you choose to live in a world where you were above kalim?
above everyone else?

when a mysterious voice asked him that while jamil was washing
his dishes in the peace and solitude of the desert night, he jumped
a little in his own skin. "now why would i want that?" he mutters
to himself, and though he thinks it's the heat getting to him, he
decides to humor this voice.

you seem like you want it. like you would do anything to get it.

"well. not anything, i suppose."

oh? there are things you would not do for power?

"i'm human. i have my limits, you know."

i'm human too.

"oh really?"

i just want to tell your story. the best stories come from pain and
growth. how will you grow from your pain, jamil viper?



Fanart and the Artists

S.No.	Name and Socials of the Artist	Page No.
1	Abel (@flowersforabel)	1
2	Kouro (@kouro7)	4
3	Chesha (@cheshanoneko-draws)	7
4	Cat (@catacropolis)	11, 52
5	Dicenete (@dicenete)	14
6	Shoopy (@boopshoops)	20, 61
7	Kestrius (@kestrius)	20, 59
8	Patches (@patchyegg87)	26, 33
9	Hermie (@datboredpencil)	25, 64
10	Glidia (@glidiaboxo)	38
11	Loser (@loser-jpg)	43
12	Rei (@reirei404)	84
13	Nemi (@nemisisnemi)	47
14	Puo (@puowei)	53
15	Umi (@umishiqu)	69

Fanart and the Artists

S.No.	Name and Socials of the Artist	Page No.
16	Aem (@aemetrine, insta)	68
17	Tinseltina (@tinseltina)	72
18	Bibi (@twstgo)	76
19	Eri (@sugarfrog.studios, insta)	83

*Thanks for
Reading! See you
in Volume 2!*

